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Casualties of Governmental Reorganization

During his first term, Richard Nixon surprised friends and foes by his performance as President. He took long-overdue initiatives in foreign affairs and responded to domestic needs in ways unexpected of a conservative Republican. He showed ability to plan thoroughly and to execute well. He was able to recruit excellent people to fill government posts, notably at the subcabinet and bureau chief levels. This was especially true in areas involving science and technology. On a few occasions, he found it necessary to force the resignation of an official, but these firings were conducted one at a time and usually with dignity.

Since winning reelection, Nixon has departed from patterns that were successful. His Administration has taken dramatic actions, seemingly without adequate planning or consultation. It has fired or lost through resignation most of the government's best administrators of science and technology. It has downgraded the status of science in the government. It has adopted a new administrative organization that will make it more difficult for the President to obtain well-judged advice.

There are those who say that the abolition of the post of President's Science Adviser and of the Office of Science and Technology were small matters and that the functions of these offices can be carried out elsewhere. Perhaps so. But the way the deed was done was not worthy of a great nation. The office was first abolished. Then someone woke up to the fact that it served important functions. After scrambling around, someone had the inspiration to transfer the functions of the office to the National Science Foundation (NSF) and appoint Guyford Stever (head of the NSF) as science adviser. The solution has merit. However, if it is to represent more than a gesture, Stever and the NSF will be overloaded with conflicting responsibilities.

Another questionable action has been taken in the important matter of energy. Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture, has been designated key man reporting to Nixon on energy and natural resources. Butz's experience in these matters is limited, and his staff at the Department of Agriculture is not equipped to deal with energy problems. Latest indications are that authority in energy matters may be divided, with George B. Shultz assuming an important role.

A further example of the downgrading of science can be seen at the Department of the Interior. This department has a proud history of accomplishment and includes many science-oriented agencies, such as those dealing with fuels and natural resources. Are these agencies to be transferred to Agriculture? If not, is another—or several—administrative layers to be imposed between them and the President?

Another aspect of the situation at the Department of the Interior exemplifies the Administration's current personnel policies. Before the election, there were in the department six assistant secretaries and a solicitor general. All were competent, hard-working Republicans, loyal to the President. Today only one remains. Five of the assistant secretaries and the solicitor general have been fired. Their fate and that of many others is not likely to make government service more attractive, as the Administration will learn in attempting to recruit replacements for the large number of posts now vacant.

Nixon's efforts to make his Administration more efficient may ultimately be successful, but insofar as science is concerned, the moves thus far have damaged rather than enhanced the cause of good government.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON