White House Science: Hail and Farewell

The abolition of the Office of Science and Technology (OST) and the transfer of its functions to the Director of the National Science Foundation (NSF) seem to have gone over in the scientific community with hardly a murmur. Not a single witness opposed this downgrading of the science advisory function during two separate days of hearings in Congress on the change. Congressman John W. Davis (D–Ga.) filed a statement protesting it, and the Federation of American Scientists also decried it. But these were the two lone voices of protest.

Congressional staffers say they were frankly surprised by the scientists' lack of objection to the shift, which was announced in a presidential reorganization plan in late January. Congress has a 60-day period, which expires on 7 April, to contest the reorganization, which includes abolishing the moribund National Aeronautics and Space Council and moving the duties of the Office of Emergency Preparedness outside the White House. Thus it looks like the change, effective 1 July, will go into effect.

William Carey, a vice president of Arthur D. Little, Inc., and once assistant director for science and human resources of the former Bureau of the Budget, now Office of Management and Budget (OMB), was consulted about whether Congress should mount opposition to the abolition of OST. He advised against such a move, arguing that, if the President doesn't want science advice, retaining OST would be futile. As to why the scientists outside government accepted their fall from grace so meekly, Carey explained:

"One factor is that they still have something at stake. They're still heavily dependent on the residue of government funding, and they do not want to pick up the first rock because they feel it's a battle they can't win."

The second factor is that the scientific community "has no real leadership in terms of political skill. They haven't had it since [Vannevar] Bush, in my view. The feedback from the scientific world to the President's technology message of a year ago was nonreactive. No flags were waved. No follow-through was organized. I think there was enough there to build on and meet the challenge."

Does this mean that the scientific community has no leadership outside of the Cambridge-based group which had easy access to the White House in the early and mid-1960's? "No," said Carey. "The Republicans have some good scientists who," he said, "are active. . . . But they don't choose to lead the forces and stimulate the thinking outside. They tend to work in their own professional sectors. . . ."

Carey cited among scientists generally a "flat" disavowal of "thinking through approaches" in the political arena. "They simply cannot put it together. They have learned very little in 25 years."

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High-level witnesses for the government, during the hearings on the plan, tried to soften the blow to the scientific community. Frederick Malek, deputy director of OMB, and Dwight A. Ink, an assistant director of OMB, insisted that moving OST to a policy group around NSF Director H. Guyford Stever did not amount to a "downgrading" of science advice. But in answer to a congressman's question as to whether NSF would coordinate all energy studies, as at one time apparently OST did, Ink replied, "They won't . . . because the energy problem is of such high priority, the problems are of such high priority, that I expect them . . . to be handled through the Domestic Council." NSF, he said, "would provide scientific support."

Would NSF be able to advise the President on how to chose between two new, technically sophisticated military aircraft, as the President's science adviser had done? Malek said he hoped that Stever "would work this kind of problem out with the Secretary of Defense before it hits the level of the President.

"In other words, I think it more effective if you have an interaction between the science adviser and the department he is working with, and he is impacting on what is coming into the President rather than coming around the other way . . ." In other words, if the science adviser loses in the first rounds, he shouldn't pester the President with his view. A government official close to the new setup put it more bluntly. "The President doesn't like to deal with a vast number of people. He doesn't like advocacy."

Indeed, minimizing friction and dissent within the Nixon White House seems to be a major goal of the OST abolition. After all, the Administration was embarrassed when, in 1969, it had to withdraw consideration of Franklin A. Long of Cornell as a possible director of NSF because Long turned out to have made statements against the ABM, which the President was then battling for. And later, an OST report opposing the supersonic transport was released after environmentalists used the courts to flush it out—at that very moment Nixon and his key aides were battling for a U.S.-built SST. Since active dissent of this sort is obviously what the Nixon aides have decided they don't want around their President, Stever may be the man for the job. After the Long incident, when most members of the science community polled were decrying the withdrawal of Long's name, Stever stated to the press that "No administration can withstand within itself an activist against itself."

Whether due to the lack of leadership in the outside science community, or the idiosyncrasies of how the top Nixon team chooses to operate the executive branch, the few weeks of nonreaction to the downgrading of science have made one thing crystal clear. As a high official stated: "I don't believe science and technology are ends in themselves. Science isn't a superior thing of itself which we have to keep on a pedestal. It has its primary impact in relation to other things like trade and the economy. . . . If science has been downgraded, it is because it has been downgraded by society—and by the people making the reorganization plan."

—DEBORAH SHAPLEY