

# Briefing

## Science, Technology, and Inflation

One of the 12 "presummit" meetings to prepare for President Ford's big anti-inflation talk-in scheduled for 27 and 28 September was devoted to the question of how science and technology can contribute to driving down inflation. At Ford's request his science adviser L. Guyford Stever, head of the National Science Foundation, assembled a group of luminaries, including former science adviser Edward E. David, for 2 days of brainstorming on 18 and 19 September at the Cosmos Club. The group addressed itself to the role of science and technology in three broad areas: (i) manufacturing, materials, and energy; (ii) agriculture and food; and (iii) health services. One of the predictable sentiments of the group was that a flourishing R & D establishment is definitely anti-inflationary because it leads to the development of more efficient and cost-saving processes. There was also agreement that science and technology would be better at bringing long-term rather than short-term relief, and that the inflation battle, as former National Bureau of Standards director Lewis M. Branscomb said, "is going to be long, slow, and tough."

The manufacturing task force observed that wrestling the economy into shape would require more emphasis on the "mundane," that is, immediately useful, technology over high technology. Other suggestions had less to do with technology than with the manipulation of existing mechanisms such as tax and antitrust policy to stimulate innovation, and with an assessment of environmental and safety laws. These laws have forced companies to divert large amounts of money that might otherwise be used to increase productivity and efficiency, and, as one expert said, some of them lead to only marginal benefits. As an example, he said, the requirement that automobiles be fitted with expensive bumpers that can withstand 5 mile-per-hour impacts did not provide enough added safety to justify the expense in times like these. In such times, he said, we must ask ourselves nasty questions, such as, "What is the dollar and cents value of a marginal life saved?"

The health panel pointed out that a number of "perverse incentives" were operating to raise costs, such as reimbursement schemes that encouraged the use of the costliest facilities, and pointless rivalry among solo practitioners that should be replaced by constructive competition between health delivery systems. Kerr White of Johns Hopkins University said that all forms of medical intervention need to be evaluated. Thorough annual physical examinations for everyone, he said, generated a lot of useless and costly data whereas selective screening would be almost as effective and far less expensive.

The agriculture group, whose spokesman was Vernon W. Ruttan of the Agricultural Development Council, remarked that few savings can be made in farm production because the substitution of fossil-fuel power for human labor and the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides have made farming just about as efficient as it is going to get. But there is still much food wastage and therefore room for increased efficiency in the processing and distribution links of the food chain. Here again, though, safety and anti-pollution regulations are eating up capital that could otherwise be used in improving efficiency and productivity in manufacturing.

Clearly, similar findings from the other presummit meetings will be forwarded to Ford. In the short term they spell increased unemployment as belts tighten; in the long term the question may be raised as to whether the nation will ever be able to afford living with a policy of continuous growth while at the same time making the investments necessary to ensure the maximum health and safety for all its citizens.—C.H.

## Science Board Gets a Nod from Congress

Trying to open a new avenue of contact between the science community and Capitol Hill, Senators Harrison A. Williams (D-N.J.) and Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) recently held the first full-dress confirmation hearing ever for new nominees to the National Science Board (NSB), the policy body for the National Science Foundation. The nomi-

nations were made last June and normally would have been rubber stamped by the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, which Williams heads. Instead however, Kennedy, who heads a subcommittee on the National Science Foundation (NSF), had the committee ask that the eight persons who had been nominated show up in Washington on 11 September for an afternoon's exchange.

There was never any question but what the Committee would recommend that the new members be confirmed. That was not the point. Kennedy used the meeting to draw out the seven nominees who appeared on their views—on the status of minorities in the sciences, on whether too much or too little is being spent on military research, and on practically everything else. Had the nominees considered whether the staff supplied to the board by NSF was adequate? How good had attendance been at board meetings? How did the newcomers plan to use their science board posts to implement their ideas?

It was pretty hard to miss the message. Kennedy and Williams had decided to encourage the usually quiescent board to speak up for itself and to feel that it will be heard on Capitol Hill. At one point Kennedy remarked that of the many science committees advising the government, the board was among the few with a potentially broad policy-making role. His prepared statement, too, amounted to an invitation for the nominees, once they were confirmed, to come back to him publicly or privately about any problems.

It said that he hoped the new members will "let us know, both formally and informally, of areas where the Congress can be helpful in assisting them in fulfilling their responsibilities."

The nominees, since confirmed, are Jewell P. Cobb, Connecticut College; Norman Hackerman, Rice University; Saunders Mac Lane, University of Chicago; Grover E. Murray, Texas Tech University; Donald B. Rice, Jr., Rand Corporation; L. Donald Shiellds, California State University at Fullerton; and James H. Zumberge, University of Nebraska at Lincoln. W. N. Hubbard of the Upjohn Co., did not appear at the hearing, so the committee has temporarily delayed forwarding his name to the Senate for confirmation.—D.S.