

A New Push for a Federal Science Department

A presidential commission will soon recommend that most R&D agencies be merged into one department; the plan faces an uphill battle

The creation of a Department of Science and Technology, an idea that has been kicking around Washington in one form or another for at least 20 years, is about to gather some political momentum. The push will come from the President's Commission on Industrial Competitiveness, which decided at a meeting on 6 December to make establishment of the new department one of its chief recommendations when it reports to President Reagan next month. The idea is also being enthusiastically championed within the White House by George A. Keyworth, II, Reagan's science adviser.

There are many roadblocks to be overcome before the recommendation becomes reality, not the least of which is uncertainty over the immediate future of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), which Keyworth heads (see story on page 1399). OSTP would be the focus for drafting a detailed proposal if Reagan endorses the recommendation. But whatever its fate, the commission's recommendation is sure to spark a major debate on the federal government's arrangements for supporting science and technology.

The commission, a body consisting mostly of chief executive officers of major corporations, will not specify in its recommendation exactly what should be included in the department. But Keyworth, who was a member of the commission, says it discussed inclusion of virtually all the federal government's civilian R&D agencies. The R&D programs of the Department of Defense would be off limits, as would those of the Department of Agriculture and those tied directly to departmental missions or regulatory activities. Just about everything else would be fair game.

If the idea goes forward, the proposed department could thus include the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, much of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the National Bureau of Standards, most of the Department of Energy—including the weapons labs—the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the U.S. Geological Survey. Its budget would be in the region of \$15 billion a year.

Creation of a Department of Science

and Technology has long been under consideration in OSTP. A proposal was batted around in the office early last year, but it was effectively sidelined when the Administration, without much input from OSTP, put forward a reorganization plan to create a Department of Trade and Industry. That plan, which died from neglect in Congress, would have merged the National Science Foundation and the National Bureau of Standards and established the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as an independent agency.

Last September, however, in an interview with *Science*, Keyworth signaled that OSTP's ambitions for a grander realignment were not dead (*Science*, 21 September, p. 1372). Arguing that science and technology are crucial to the United States' industrial competitive-

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ness and that the federal government's programs in this area need to be better coordinated and more directly tied with presidential policy-making, he said, "I think we have reached the point when we need to do something."

At that time, the recommendation for a department was being put together by a committee of the President's Commission on Industrial Competitiveness. Keyworth was a member of both the committee and the commission itself. Sounding a theme remarkably like Keyworth's, the committee recently advised the commission that bringing the federal government's R&D programs together into a cabinet-level department would give science and technology "a higher level of attention, greater predictability of support, more coherent policies, and better long-range planning to enhance the competitive status of our nation." The commission itself at its 6 December meeting is said to have agreed unanimously to make the proposal one of its strongest recommendations.

The commission is expected to meet with Reagan in January to deliver its final report. Some spadework among White House staff has already begun, however. Last month, John A. Young, president of Hewlett-Packard and chairman of the commission, met with Edwin Meese III, the President's counsellor, and several other senior Administration officials to brief them on the Department of Science and Technology recommendation. Meese is said to have reacted favorably to the notion.

The idea does have at least one potential political plus for the Administration: it would provide the means to carry out Reagan's pledge to do away with the Department of Energy. According to Keyworth, the commission felt that the proposed department "would benefit from having some clear missions," and thus agreed that virtually all the Department of Energy's R&D programs, including its weapons work, should be included.

But a lot more spadework needs to be done before the recommendation is transformed into an Administration proposal. The Office of Management and Budget is said to be cool toward the idea, and the heads of the agencies involved have not yet been consulted. Moreover, with the budget deficit looming as the central preoccupation of the federal government over the next few months, the time is not exactly ripe for consideration of a major overhaul of the executive branch.

Selling the idea to the Administration may be easier than selling it to Congress, however. Legislative approval would be needed to carry out a reorganization on such a grand scale, and once a detailed proposal is sent to Capitol Hill it would be sure to attract hostile fire.

From the point of view of the scientific community, the proposal is likely to be seen as a mixed blessing. Although creation of a new department would give science and technology a seat at the Cabinet table, it could also reduce the plurality in the system. At present, with R&D programs scattered among several different agencies and departments, and with numerous congressional committees having responsibility for parts of the federal R&D enterprise, there are many

points at which to apply political pressure.

The proposal is also sure to attract opposition from interest groups who like things fine the way they are. For example, various influential health lobbies are likely to resist a move to strip the National Institutes of Health away from the Department of Health and Human Services and put it into a department with more of an industrial focus.

Then there is the problem of congress-

sional jurisdictions. Any reorganization plan that would require committees to give up some jurisdiction always prompts some bloody turf battles, and this plan is likely to be no different. One compromise would be to structure the proposal in such a way that the various components of the new department would continue to report to their current committees. But that would not help advance the cause of better coordination and planning.

The key to the proposal's success will be just how strongly Reagan himself is willing to push it. In the past, new departments have only been established when the President has made them a top priority and is prepared to lobby personally for them. In this case, the proposal will reach the President with the endorsement of a commission composed of prominent industrialists, but it will have a tough time competing against the deficit for his attention.—COLIN NORMAN

The Knives Are Out for OSTP

Senior White House officials are pushing for its elimination, but science adviser Keyworth says he has Reagan's support

"It's an indication of the times," says George A. Keyworth, II. "These are hardball days."

Keyworth is referring to a continuing effort by some top White House aides to abolish the office that he directs, the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), thereby putting him out of a job. This effort, which has been rumored in Washington for several weeks, took on additional momentum when Keyworth's future was discussed at a recent meeting of the senior White House advisers who are presently formulating next year's federal budget. According to a knowledgeable White House official—not in Keyworth's office—many of the participants agreed that the science adviser's office should indeed be eliminated, but postponed any final decision.

In response to an inquiry, Keyworth acknowledges that he has enemies on the White House staff and in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) who would like to see OSTP dismantled and its responsibilities dispersed. Talk of such a move has been loud enough for him to seek assurances of support from Edwin Meese III, the President's counselor, "on a couple of occasions" in recent months. Finally, on the morning of 10 December, Keyworth thought it necessary to approach Reagan himself. At a private meeting in the Oval Office, Keyworth says, Reagan assured him that "any rumors about my termination are ridiculous and unfounded; that he approves of my work; and that he very much wants me to continue to serve as his science adviser."

The animosity toward Keyworth at other levels of the White House appears to be rooted in both personal and institu-

tional conflicts. Various officials note, for example, that he does not get along well with either Richard Darman, the deputy chief of the White House staff, or Craig Fuller, the President's chief assistant for Cabinet affairs. Both are clearly formidable opponents. Darman was recently characterized by *The Wall Street Journal* as "the White House's Power Broker," because he supervises presidential speechwriting, coordinates legislative strategy, chairs the budget working group, and controls the flow of paper into the Oval Office. Unlike Keyworth and Meese, who generally hew to conservative ideology, Darman and Fuller are considered political pragmatists. Together, they are said to have presided over a sharp decline in Keyworth's influence. Neither could be reached by *Science* for comment.

Although Keyworth refuses to talk about his personal relations with other White House officials, he acknowledges that some of his opinions have stirred considerable controversy within the federal bureaucracy. "One who does nothing makes no enemies," he says proudly. At least two major controversies come quickly to mind, he says. One was stirred by his early criticism of the space station promoted by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and endorsed by the President last December. "I was concerned for years that it lacked definition, and I was skeptical of some of the claims being made about the processing of materials in space," Keyworth says. "These tough questions clearly were not welcomed by everyone."

But others within the Administration say that it was not just Keyworth's early criticism of the space station that ruffled

feathers but also his recent quixotic endorsement of a manned lunar base or a visit to Mars as the most sensible reason for the station. Keyworth acknowledges that "I did indeed make provocative statements, and we have had an interesting debate ever since." He also explains that "I am, like most people of the sputnik generation, a space nut."

Keyworth adds that a second major controversy was caused by his unflagging enthusiasm for the President's proposal to defend the nation against a ballistic missile attack, popularly known as the "Star Wars" plan. "As you know, I've been a vocal supporter since [23 March] the day the speech was given," he says. "There are people in this Administration who wish that I'd been struck by a car on that evening." The opposition comes from those who believe either that the program is a political liability or that it "should be used as an entry fee in the arms control talks," Keyworth says. He firmly opposes any negotiating trade-offs involving Star Wars and routinely displays more interest in the program than senior Pentagon officials.

Some White House officials also seem to hold Keyworth responsible for the awkward publicity that ensued earlier this year when a White House scientific task force recommended prompt action to limit acid rain. The panel that presented this unwelcome advice was conceived by Keyworth and reported to him. "He personally presided over this catastrophe, which careened from embarrassment to embarrassment," says one official. "Yet he was full of assurances that this wouldn't happen when the study got under way."

This criticism closely parallels that of-