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A Serious Parlor Game

The resignation of George Keyworth II has energized one of Washington's favorite parlor games: guessing who will be the next science adviser to the President. Like psychoanalyzing Russian foreign policy from the lineup of faces on the balcony during the May Day Parade, the only prerequisites for entering the game are a list of likely and unlikely candidates, the ability to drop insiders' names with measured regularity, and a conspiratorial whisper. Beyond this persiflage, however, lies a serious decision that will affect the health of science in this country for many years to come.

This appointment comes at the point of entry into the Gramm-Rudman era, a deceptively inviting territory containing a potentially lethal budgetary minefield. The danger of the Gramm-Rudman amendment is not that it requires a balanced budget; many states, including California, have operated with mandatory balanced budgets for years without difficulty. The danger is the coupling of two "hold-their-feet-to-the-fire" provisions of the bill. The first involves an automatic-triggering action. If the projected budget deficit exceeds the targets voted into law, an automatic reduction process is set into motion. Such cuts are frequently executed across the board, with little or no evaluation of their quality. The second provision is that certain programs are designated as "privileged sanctuaries" for which funding cannot be reduced beyond specified sums. These privileged programs are the biggest, probably the most wasteful, but also the most politically sensitive—defense and entitlements. Reductions then must be achieved at the expense of the discretionary part of the budget, which contains most of the allocations for basic research.

The optimist might say that to prevent arbitrary and inappropriate across-the-board cuts, Congress and the President will compromise to approach the budgetary process rationally. The pessimist might say that the automatic provisions will allow individuals in Congress and the Executive to posture for their beloved favorites, with the knowledge that the automatic sequestration decisions will be invoked when there is a failure to compromise. At this stage no one knows precisely which programs will be cut, but reductions as high as 7 to 14 percent are predicted. Unless science's indisputable priorities are established and adhered to, research could be dealt some devastating blows.

In view of this background the selection of a science adviser becomes vital. Rumor mills suggest that a strong figure with an independent reputation is not wanted because he or she might be primarily loyal to his or her constituency instead of to the Administration. In the past, the country had to operate without a presidential science adviser on the basis of just such logic. However, the urgency of the current decisions does not allow such timidity. And it does not seem necessary, given a highly popular President who will not be running for reelection. An alternative system, in which the head of the National Science Foundation was designated the science adviser, was tried in the past and was rumored to be one of the plans under consideration. The present head of NSF, Eric Bloch, is an intelligent and vigorous leader who would make an excellent science adviser, but a dual role is not good either for NSF or for the country.

An ideal presidential science adviser would be an individual with leadership qualities and contacts with many scientific and scholarly societies in many disciplines. The Administration has a right to demand someone who is publicly loyal, but the scientific community has a right to expect someone who has the courage to fight for science and the long-range good of the country in the face of the inevitably enormous pressures for short-range budgetary fixes.

England's current financial difficulties may have resulted, in part, from the subsidies from her empire having concealed inefficiencies in her home industry. The United States was similarly subsidized, by a land with ample raw materials. In the future, however, we will have to live by our wits. If basic research was important in the past, it becomes even more crucial to the future. The Administration needs, and science needs, a strong spokesperson who can build bridges between scientific communities and the decision-making apparatus of the government.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.