News and views

The Social Aspects of Science

ONE year ago, at the 1955 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the AAAS Council established a five-member interim committee to make a preliminary study of the present state of science in the United States and its relation to social forces and issues. The committee, headed by Ward Pigman, professor of biochemistry at the University of Alabama Medical Center, distributed its provisional report to members of the AAAS Council prior to the Association's 1956 annual meeting, which was held in New York City in December. The committee also called for a full debate on the subject and indicated its belief "that society and science are now so intermeshed and interacting that scientific groups must reevaluate their traditional 'isolationist' positions and accept the place in the democratic process demanded by the current importance of science".

The interim report, entitled "Society in the Scientific Revolution", concluded:

> "The growth of science and the great enhancement of the degree of control which we now exert over nature has given rise to new social practices, of great scope and influence, which make use of new scientific knowledge. While this advance of science has greatly improved the condition of human life, it has also generated new hazards of unprecedented magnitude. These include: the dangers to life from widely disseminated radiation, the burden of man-made chemicals, fumes, and smogs of unknown biological effect which we now absorb, large-scale deterioration of our natural resources, and the potential of totally destructive war. The determination that scientific knowledge is to be used for human good, or for purposes of destruction, is in the control of social agencies. For such decisions, these agencies and ultimately the people themselves, need to be aware of the facts and the probable consequences of action. Here scientists can play a decisive role: they can bring the facts and their estimates of the results of proposed actions before the people.
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> "This appears to be a critical time for review of the general state of science and its relation to society. We are now in the midst of a new and unprecedented scientific revolution which promises to bring about profound changes in the condition of human life. The forces and processes now coming under human control are beginning to match in size and intensity those of nature itself, and our total environment is now subject to human influence.
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> "In this situation it becomes imperative to determine that these new powers shall be used for the maximum human good, for if the benefits to be derived from them are great, the possibility of harm is correspondingly serious.
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> "As scientists, we are particularly concerned with determining how we should meet this situation, both as individuals and through our organizations. In marked contrast to other associations, scientific societies seldom consider the social and economic position of their group. Action taken on social problems with a scientific or technological base are sporadic and usually forced. Yet the democratic system is operated to a considerable extent under stimulus from groups, each representing the views and interests of its members.
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> "Business and labor are not backward in presenting their opinions on social questions that affect them. They make sure that in the final decision their views have been considered. There are many who think that the viewpoint of scientists should also be stated publicly. In fact, if others express their opinions and scientists do not, a distorted picture will be presented, a picture in which the importance of science will be lacking and the democratic process will become to that extent unrepresentative."

After considering the report, the members of the Council of the Association voted on December 30th to establish a larger committee for the purpose of further defining the problems, assembling the relevant facts, and mapping out a practical program through which the AAAS might express its views on social problems that have been raised by the innovations of science.

AIP Development Program

THE purchase of the new Physics Building at 335 East 45th Street, New York, was consummated by the American Institute of Physics on January 2, 1957. The purchase price was covered by cash payments totalling approximately $160 000, and by the assumption of a 4.6% mortgage amounting to approximately $120 000. The mortgage is due in 1960, but it is hoped that it will be possible to pay it off before that year.

The Institute's contractor, James E. Mitchell & Son, Builders, got his men to work on the same day in an effort to have the building converted and ready for use by June 1 when the old building is to be vacated.

When the old building is given up, the net proceeds of its sale, in cash and purchase money mortgage, will at least balance out the commitments incurred in buying the new building. They do not, however, leave an appreciable amount for conversion of the new building which, except for a small top floor, is just a shell requiring new heating, ventilating, and electrical systems as well as an elevator. Finish floors, ceilings, and partitions must be installed. The contractors estimate that at least $250 000 will be required for this work. The Institute will not attempt to pay off the mortgage on the new building until funds are assured for the conversion.

In view of the obligations thus assumed by the AIP, the Development Fund Committee is redoubling its ef-