National Academy of Sciences

100th Anniversary

THE year now ending has marked the centennial of the founding of the National Academy of Sciences, and in celebration the Academy arranged a four-day commemorative program during the period from October 21 to 24 in Washington, D. C. The program included the formal presentation of greetings by representatives of other academies, learned societies, and universities, and various social events, including a reception in honor of the Academy's foreign guests given by Secretary of State Dean Rusk. A substantial part of the meeting was devoted to four sessions of invited papers by distinguished members of the Academy. President Kennedy's talk on the second day, just one month before he was brutally slain on November 22, would have been remarkable if only because Chief Executives so rarely address gatherings of scientists. It was all the more so in being a thoughtful expression of national scientific policy and a warm tribute to the Academy, and the text is accordingly given in full in the pages that follow.

The Academy came into being as the direct result of the efforts of a small group of scientists led by Alexander Dallas Bache, physicist, superintendent of the Coast Survey, and great grandson of Benjamin Franklin. The other members of the group included Admiral Charles H. Davis, chief of the Navy's Bureau of Navigation, astronomer B. A. Gould, mathematician Benjamin Peirce, and biologist Louis Agassiz. Professor Agassiz, a member of the Harvard faculty, was instrumental in providing the group with a political ally in the person of Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts. The latter was persuaded to introduce a bill in Congress for the establishment of a National Academy of Sciences under the names of fifty incorporators, all prominent in the sciences, with power to form their own organization and set their own rules. The proposed Academy, with a membership limit of fifty, was to "investigate, examine, experiment, and report" on scientific or technical matters at the request of any department of the government, with the expenses to be paid from special appropriations. Joseph Henry, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and America's leading physicist, had previously expressed misgivings about the political feasibility of a national organization of exclusive membership being established by Congress. Although he disapproved of the form in which the Wilson bill had been cast, he did not raise strenuous objections, he confessed later, because he was convinced that it would be rejected by Congress. Senator Wilson, however, did not present his bill until March 3, 1863, the last day of the 37th Congress. As part of the final work to be completed before the scheduled adjournment of the session at midnight, the act of incorporation was approved by both houses without discussion and was signed by President Lincoln the same day.

Although conceived as an instrument for providing practical technological service to the government, the Academy had little opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the Civil War effort. Its war-time assignments were largely limited to such matters as investigations of weights, measures, and coinage, magnetic deviation and corrosion in iron ships, and the purity testing of whiskeys.

Bache, who served as the first president, died in 1867 and was succeeded by Joseph Henry. Despite his original reservations, Henry was from the beginning actively involved in Academy affairs, and his term of office was devoted to strengthening the organization and to emphasizing the importance to the government and to the nation of "abstract" science. The limit of fifty members was removed by charter amendment, and the significance of discoveries resulting from original research became the primary basis for membership, making it a signal honor for an individual to be elected as a member of the National Academy of Sciences.