

In Washington a Tower of Babel

Gloom hangs heavy over Washington.

Betty Vetter estimates that the draft will remove almost two thirds of the normal population from three classes of physics graduate students.

Marvin Goldberger expects leadership in elementary-particle physics to pass from the United States to western Europe and the Soviet Union.

Philip Handler predicts that public disenchantment and hardening congressional attitudes will reduce federal support of basic science.

Donald Hornig says that his committee is aware of federal-laboratory ineffectiveness but can not "give a solution."

Speaking to the American Physical Society (see page 71) Mrs Vetter, who is executive director of the Scientific Manpower Commission, warned that the new draft regulations have gone too far in the interest of equity. By simultaneously ending deferment of younger graduate students, suspending advisory lists of essential activities and directing that the oldest go first, the National Security Council, she says, will empty student and teacher roles now and overcrowd classrooms when everybody comes back to the campus at once. "I believe that our current Selective Service policy not only fails to meet its primary aim, fairness," she said, "but also endangers the future of the nation because it fails to consider the long-term necessity for manpower planning."

Goldberger, professor at Princeton, addressed the National Academy of Sciences and expressed his regret at budget cutbacks and the failure of the US to develop colliding-beam apparatus.

As the APS Washington banquet speaker, Handler, who is chairman of the National Science Board, warned against weaknesses of the present pluralistic "nonsystem" whereby many government agencies support research without coördination but none of them has legal responsibility for university welfare. Meanwhile, he pointed out, the National Science Foundation provides only 15% of federal support to academic science.

The issue to which Hornig spoke before Representative Emilio Q. Daddario's subcommittee on science, research and develop-

ment is an old one that needs attention. It is represented best, perhaps, by the Atomic Energy Commission and its laboratories. They were developed mainly on the assumption that atomic energy meant cheap power for everyone and should be developed, therefore, as a national resource. Gradually it became clear that nuclear electricity looked a lot like nonnuclear electricity; you could have either one by flicking a switch on the wall. And the influence of atomic energy on society was not going to be vastly greater than that of the railroad, the telephone, radio and automobiles, all of which became part of the social scene without government commissions to ensure their development.

This realization came late, though, and by that time, AEC laboratories were conducting a magnificent effort to make cheap nuclear power. So now are many large electric-equipment manufacturers and power companies. Probably the job can be safely left in their hands. But organizations, once formed, seldom dissolve themselves and are usually incapable, without outside help, of changing to serve present needs.

Gloom and confusion hang together over Washington. A pluralistic nonsystem, a many-headed monster, is handling a great national resource, US science and technology. Meanwhile disparate voices from a tower of Babel, each in its separate way, cry out alarms. Missing from the whole situation is any suggestion of coördination, of mutual understanding, of shared hopes and aims.

NSF has a mission to relieve the situation. In its 1964 annual report the director, Leland J. Haworth, reporting on his first year, wrote of "the charge given NSF by the Congress to develop and encourage the pursuit of a national policy." The foundation must, he said, "take into account the activities and procedures of other federal agencies." Yet the job is not being done. Some say that the legislation defining NSF is a little bashful, that it needs clarification to give NSF a stronger hand.

Whatever is wrong, someone somehow should give us a recognizable science policy to replace our present tower of Babel.

—R. Hobart Ellis Jr