

What Future for the AEC?

Amidst the ongoing reshuffling of the executive branch of the government *The New York Times* recently reported a recommendation to the President that the Atomic Energy Commission shift its military programs and research activities to the Department of Defense and the National Science Foundation respectively and become an "energy agency" that would deal with the development of all types of energy sources. Officials of the President's Advisory Council on Executive Organization, the source of the reported recommendation, have since denied that any such proposal has been formally made to the President.

They explain that there has been discussion within the Council of making the AEC an energy agency under a proposed Department of Natural Resources and that transfer of the military and research activities from the AEC was discussed as part of this reorganization. They hasten to add, however, that any new role for the AEC is several years in the future and that divestment of military and research activities by the AEC was only one of a number of possibilities discussed. The sole change contemplated in the AEC at this time is to shift the 20-employee Division of Radiation Protection Standards to the new Environmental Protection Agency. This move will at long last relieve the awkward situation in which the AEC has tried to function as both the developer and regulator of nuclear applications.

Since the AEC is the largest source of funds for physics research in the US, the physics community will be relieved to learn that apparently the AEC's highly respected Division of Research is not in danger of suddenly being reorganized out of existence during the current flurry of this kind of activity in Washington.

Even so it is not too soon for physicists to start thinking about the pros and cons of a future restructuring of this agency that has been so intimately involved with the course of US physics.

At first glance the suggestion to shift basic research from the AEC to NSF seems to have merit—why not take these activities from an agency whose obvious mission is to develop nuclear energy and put them with the agency whose obvious mission is to develop basic research? But on second thought what would this transfer really achieve? In our zeal to maintain a logical consistency between names of agencies and activities would we find we have merely succeeded in disbanding a group of people in one agency that has proven highly effective in the art of managing research and have left ourselves with the uncertain task of starting from scratch to build up an equally effective group of managers in the second agency?

Perhaps an even more far-reaching question is the extent to which it is desirable or necessary to have at least two independent sources of federal support for any one research discipline. It is interesting to note that even Soviet physics receives substantial support from both the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Soviet "AEC."

Finally, one of the main reasons for creating the AEC was to provide civilian control over the development and production of nuclear weapons. The physics community, which played an important role in originally pointing out the need for this control, will certainly want to consider to what extent this control would be diminished if these responsibilities were now shifted to the DOD.

—Harold L. Davis