editorial

Time to end feast or famine

The President's announced intention of cutting the budget by $7.5 billion invites concern that much of this reduction will come out of the federal budget for research and development. If we remind ourselves that only $60 billion out of the $300-billion federal budget is considered "discretionary" and that the $20-billion R&D budget now accounts for one third of this $60 billion dollars of cuttable funds, then we can see that this concern is justified.

Although Office of Management and Budget officials insist that the R&D budget will not be singled out and that their office is looking this time at both discretionary and non-discretionary items, past history prevents us from being too encouraged by these statements, however welcome they are as indications of a more favorable attitude. Even if OMB is able to make good on its promises, the traditional political pressures on Congress will very likely present us once again with a situation in which the contributions of science and technology to the country's long-term interests are in danger of being sacrificed in favor of short-range considerations.

These periodic crises are bound to continue until the Administration and Congress can get together and work out a responsible, long-range science policy that recognizes the essential role of science and technology in maintaining the national welfare.

Glimmers of hope for believing that these two seats of government may be moving closer to this goal can be found not only in OMB's recent statements of intent but in the new Administration's more receptive attitude toward the need for restoring a White House science advisory apparatus and recent reorganizations in Congress that promise to give science and technology a fairer hearing in the competition with politically more marketable programs. Perhaps the biggest step forward in Congress is the newly-passed measure that changes the name of the old House Committee on Science and Astronautics to the Committee on Science and Technology and broadens its powers in keeping with the new title. As a result, this committee will have the authority for overseeing all federally funded R&D programs except for those involving military or nuclear research. Other significant changes include (1) assigning a broader role to the General Accounting Office that will encourage it to go beyond its bookkeeping activities and perform evaluations of ongoing programs and reach judgments about relative cost benefit and (2) the creation of a Congressional Budget Office, which is expected to become Congress's equivalent to the Administration's OMB. This considerable enhancement of Congressional staff expertise for budgetary analysis and review together with the new Office of Technology Assessment will, we can hope, encourage Congress to begin taking a more intelligent and longer-range view of national priorities than it has in the past.

Typical of the policy problems relating to science and technology that are crying out for intelligent resolution is the one of federal support of graduate training. In contrast to the period of generous support in the 1960's, federal graduate support for science and engineering is at this point virtually extinct. At the same time there is already concern being expressed in the energy field, for instance, that the rate at which we can develop new energy resources may soon be limited by a scarcity of trained scientists and engineers (see the report "U.S. Energy Prospects" published this year by the National Academy of Engineering). The next step in the familiar scenario of the sinusoidal cycle is, of course, a belated crash program a few years hence offering millions for graduate support.

Now, with a newly-elected and newly-reorganized Congress at hand, is a good time for scientists to resolve to try even harder to impress our elected representatives with the need for a well-conceived, long-range science policy that will assure a healthy diet for the nation's science and technology programs—not a feast or famine.

Harold L. Davis