editorial

Optimism about Washington

As this issue goes to press we are awaiting the annual announcement of the Administration's budget—for the science community, the moment of truth about how science ranks among national priorities in the President's program after a year in office. We have good reasons to be optimistic. At the recent awards ceremony for the National Medals of Science, Mr. Carter observed that the quality of scientific equipment, the number of top-ranked research centers and the percentage of young scientists have all been falling off and that corrective action must be taken.

These remarks would seem to indicate a sympathetic understanding of, say, the plight of funding in high-energy physics reported by Walter Sullivan in the 2 January issue of *The New York Times*. Sullivan points out that CERN, the competitive high-energy facility in Europe, has a budget twice that not just of Fermilab but of the whole US high-energy program. Robert R. Wilson, director of the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, may resign shortly over the frustration of inadequate funding. The funding problem for the physical sciences as a whole in the US is distressingly similar and is rooted in the fact that in past years research budgets have not kept up with inflation. With the added factor that the real cost of research grows each year because of the ever increasing complexity of research equipment, the result can only be a gradual deterioration of US research from preeminence to second-class position.

In reviewing the past year in Washington, we can point to other reasons for feeling optimistic that the Administration is sensitive to this problem and the importance of physical science to national well being. First, of course, there have been the numerous appointments of highly qualified physical scientists (many of them physicists) to high positions in the government. To mention a few: Frank Press, the White House science adviser; Harold Brown, Secretary of Defense; Robert Frosch, Administrator of NASA; George Pimental, deputy director, and James Krumhansl, assistant director for physical sciences, both at NSF; John Deutsch, director, Office of Energy Research at DOE, and Ernest Ambler, expect to be confirmed shortly as director of NBS. To cite another example, we have learned from reliable sources that the Department of Commerce has decided against insisting on contemplated cuts in basic research activities at the National Bureau of Standards.

And the past year also shows an encouraging responsiveness from Congress. This was highly evident in Congress's role in amending the bill establishing the new Department of Energy. Scientists were greatly concerned that the Administration bill provided no place in DOE's structure for administration of the sizeable basic research programs that had been funded by ERDA and previously by the AEC. A concerted emergency effort was made by the science community to educate members of Congress to the dangers that the DOE bill posed to the national research program. In response to this effort key members of the House were able to insist that the bill which emerged from the House–Senate Conference contain an amendment to create a special office in DOE to administer the basic research programs—the Office of Energy Research.

Chances are when the President's budget is made public the science community will find many things about it to criticize. And we can be sure that the decisions made by Congress in the ensuing budgetary process will not always be to our liking. But this year in Washington there would appear to be a more responsive understanding on the part of both the Administration and Congress of the crucial importance to the national economy of maintaining a strong research effort. And we are encouraged to hope that significant progress will be made in coming to grips with the two most fundamental problems besetting the national research effort—budgets made inadequate by inflation and higher costs and the need for a responsible, long-range science policy.

—*Harold L. Davis*