

## Science advice: sooner rather than later

Recently a special panel of scientists and technologists provided the basis for a key policy decision by the Administration. We refer to the commission chaired by Charles Townes that was convened by the current administration to review the nation's options in the strategic weapons area. The commission completed a definitive analysis of the weaknesses in the "race-track" MX scheme and recommended against development of this system. In response, the Administration abandoned the "race-track" scheme and opted instead for the more modest plan of installing a small number of MX missiles in hardened Minuteman sites.

The scientific community can take satisfaction in the fact that the Townes commission was able to make a meaningful contribution to the policy-making process that has enabled our country to avoid investing in a mammoth new weapons system which their analysis showed would very likely have turned out to be an unprecedented strategic and economic disaster.

But the more important observation to be made about this experience is that if the White House had been receiving independent science advice on such technical military problems on a regular and continuing basis the "race-track" scheme would likely have been headed off much earlier and the country would have been spared much wasted effort and time as well as political anguish.

In other words, there is a strong need to re-establish a body of scientific advisors similar to the old PSAC (President's Science Advisory Committee), which served effectively for many years before it was dismantled by the Nixon administration. Such a group could help policy makers recognize and steer clear of ill-advised proposals early in the game, instead of having to call for expert analysis on a crisis basis only after becoming deeply involved with the proposals.

We are, therefore, quite encouraged by the news that George Keyworth, the Presidential science advisor, is seeking approval from the White House to establish just such a body of advisors. Although the *Washington Post* (2 December) reports that the proposed board of 15 would report to the science advisor rather than to the President (as did the old PSAC), this is not a critical difference and we devoutly hope that by the time this page appears in print the White House will have taken the next logical step beyond the Townes commission and accepted the science advisor's proposal to establish a permanent, ongoing body that will provide independent science advice sooner rather than later.

Harold L. Davis