Clinton Defends Nation's R&D Against Congress But Neglects to Offer Major Science Policy

After nearly three years in the White House, President Clinton was billed to deliver his first speech on science and technology. Washington's science community and its press corps were advised that it was to be a major policy address, marking the President's presentation of the National Medals of Science and Technology on 18 October.

The scene was just about right for a major statement on science: a "bully pulpit" of the East Room of the White House, where on this occasion even the crystal chandeliers and gold damask curtains lacked the luster of the medal winners. "Through persistence and focused intellectual energy," Clinton said of the 16 medalists: "They have stretched our horizons, expanded the frontiers of knowledge, peeled away the secrets of nature, cured disease, created new industries such as that of optical storage." He also singled out one of the more mundane developments: "They have invented the adhesive used for Post-Its"—those little yellow note tablets produced by 3M.

Not surprisingly under the circumstances, Clinton gave an upbeat assessment of science and technology. This was in stark contrast to his recent lamentations about threats to the country's "social fabric" and the nation mired "in a funk." To the medalists, he said: "We are proud of all of you and what you have done. Your achievements give us confidence that the United States will continue to lead in science and technology for many years to come."

Pride in Nobel laureates

Clinton offered some other evidence. "In a year when seven of nine Nobel laureates for science . . . were American," he noted, "we can feel assured that our scientific leadership is unchallenged. We can also feel proud that every one of these Nobel Prize winners has been supported in their research efforts by the United States government."

The President then turned philosophical. "Our ability to offer people opportunity clearly depends upon our ability to spread the fruits of our knowledge. In other words, our leadership depends upon our commitment to science, to technology, to research, to learning. We have always revered science and its implicit promise of progress. We are in a way a whole nation of inventors and explorers and tinkerers. We believe in technology and we are determined to pursue technology in all of its manifestations. These things seem to me to be deeply embedded in our national character and our national history."

The picture he painted had a rosy hue. "The private businesses represented here today will always be the most important investors in research and development," Clinton stated. He neglected to mention, however, that such industrial giants as AT&T, IBM, General Electric, Westinghouse, Eastman Kodak and Xerox have made reductions of as much as 30% in their once mighty basic research centers in pursuit of shorter-term gains to commercialize their products. Clinton seemed to have this in mind when he advanced his larger theme: "Today, global competition and rapid change have made technology clearly more central to our future than even before. And because it is so often difficult for individual firms to reap the benefits of discovery and innovation, the public sector must continue to play a role."

So, said Clinton, his Administration has "strengthened our investments in basic science research" and increased "industry-led efforts such as the Commerce Department's Advanced Technology Program and Manufacturing Extension Program" as well as "market-led solutions to our nation's environmental challenges." But, Clinton asserted, his Administration's plans for R&D would be cut by one-third by the year 2002 if the Republican-dominated 104th Congress had its way. "We could have a balanced budget to show for it tomorrow," said Clinton, "but a decade or a generation from now our nation will be much the poorer for doing that. . . . We must resist these drastic cuts, for constant churning innovation is the key to economic growth and national strength in the 21st century."

Most of Clinton's talk might be compared with President Reagan's hohum "feel good" speeches. In a perverse way, the speech was a reminder to some that Clinton no longer seems as interested in science as he was when campaigning in 1992. Back then Clinton and Al Gore Jr, his candidate for vice president, met with industrial and academic scientists and corporate leaders and assured them of support once they were elected. Clinton's arrival in the White House had held great promise for the science community, which made his failure to enunciate a science doctrine for the future all the more disappointing.

The 18-minute speech had gone through more than a dozen drafts, the first few in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and later ones by White House speech writers and reelection strategists. Clinton and the campaign handlers rejected the early OSTP drafts as concentrating on research more than on technology.

No hints about policy

The speech contained no clues as to how far Clinton is prepared to go in resisting the proposed cuts by Republicans in the fiscal 1996 budget, which was to have been completed before the government's year began on 1 October. Afterwards one of the Administration's sharpest Republican adversaries on R&D, Representative Robert S. Walker of Pennsylvania, chairman of the House Science Committee and vice chairman of the House Budget Committee, complained that Clinton was "simply defending the way things have been done by his Administration and in previous ones, and he appeared to have no agenda for adapting government R&D to the changing world. He's looking backward."

Though Clinton neglected to speak about his policy for R&D, his own Committee of Advisers on Science and Technology sent the President and Congressional leaders a "statement of principles" that its members had prepared in the hope of guiding science and technology funding decisions. The statement affirms the need for stable funding for basic and applied R&D. It also calls for strong Federal support for research and education at universities, research institutions and national laboratories.

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