

News and views

Science and Communication

FAS Committee Reports on Visa Situation

Last October the council of the Federation of American Scientists established a four-man committee to study the present condition of international scientific communication, with special reference to difficulties encountered by foreign scientists who have applied for U. S. visas for the purpose of attending scientific meetings in this country. The first formal report of the committee was summarized by Victor F. Weisskopf, professor of physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, before a meeting of the Federation in Washington, D. C. on May 1.

Pointing out that the visa situation has become increasingly more serious since the passage of the Internal Security (McCarran) Act of 1950, which contains severe restrictions on the granting of visas, the committee report stated that scientists, as a group, have had a great deal more trouble than other groups. "Among scientists," it said, "physicists, and indeed all those whose field is believed 'atomic' in the minds of nonscientists, are particularly affected. At present it seems that at least 50 percent of all the foreign scientists who want to enter the U. S. meet some difficulties. The figure is higher for French scientists, where it may reach 70 percent."

The total number of recent cases brought to the attention of the committee in which visa applications had been refused or indefinitely delayed amounted to about sixty, according to the report, and it was estimated that the actual number might be at least three times as large.

In cases where visa applications are definitely denied, it was stated, the reasons for denial are not ordinarily given and can only be inferred from what is known of the individual's background and from the type of questions concerning his activities which have been raised by the consular agent. In many instances, however, the report said, the scientist whose visa was refused has been well known for his opposition to communism, and while there are a number of important scientists in Europe who have in one connection or another expressed sympathy for some ideas commonly associated with the radical left, it is usually accepted that it would be impossible to obtain visas for these individuals and invitations to visit the United States are rarely extended to any of them.

"In France," according to the report, "almost everybody who was or is a member of the 'Association des

Travailleurs Scientifiques' has consistently been refused a visa to the U. S. Unfortunately, about 70 percent of the scientists in France are or have been members of this organization. It has never been subversive or Communist and includes among its members all shades of political colors. The probable reason for blacklisting this association is the fact that F. Joliot was its president for one year after the war."

When applying for a U. S. visa, it was indicated, scientists are often told that the entire procedure should not take more than a few weeks. Each scientist is requested to sign under oath a questionnaire in which he must list those organizations with which he has been associated for the last fifteen years as well as all his addresses and professional connections during this period. In addition, according to the report, the applicants are often subjected to a rather intense personal questioning concerning their associations and political opinions. In most instances the applicant finds that the consul is not in a position to make a final decision but must send the application to Washington.

Upon arriving in Washington, according to one high-placed official, the application is added to a constantly growing collection of other visa applications in the State Department's passport and visa division, which has had to contend with this increasing backlog of work without the benefit of any increase in personnel. Action has recently been taken on this score, however, with the result that the division is now expected to be able to employ about thirty new staff members to help cope with the problem.

In most cases, it has been reported, delays of from four months to more than one year between the time an application was submitted and the time it was approved have been encountered by those foreign scientists who have actually received visas. "This delay," the report points out, "makes it very difficult for foreign scientists to attend scientific meetings in the U. S., since invitations usually are not sent out more than six months in advance."

The report of the Federation's committee on passport and visa problems lists the following four major consequences of present American visa policy which are described as being detrimental:

"(a) It is contrary to the fundamental principles of our political philosophy which is based upon openness and freedom of information and movement. Any exclusion of people from this country on grounds of their political ideas should be kept to the absolute minimum and applied only when obvious danger exists of an abuse of the visit for conspiratorial purposes. The present restrictive visa policy goes far beyond this minimum and therefore runs counter to our own political standards. We are undermining our basic ideas and principles with these actions and hence they must be considered as a grave threat and a serious source of danger to our society.

"(b) It is harmful to U. S. science. Today it is practically impossible to hold international meetings in the United States. This deprives U. S. scientists of a very

important medium for the cross-fertilization and exchange of ideas. These meetings and subsequent visits which foreign scientists make to American institutions are the only possibilities for exchanges of opinions and ideas between foreign scientists and the bulk of our own scientists. It is obvious to anyone who knows scientific life that the personal exchange of ideas is a most important way of productive work. The mere reading of foreign literature can never replace the personal give and take, seminars, discussions, and actual collaboration. International exchange of ideas and discussion is indispensable because details of scientific research are never written down in the actual publications. Frequently, only personal conversation can reveal a special technique or a special instrumental design which foreign scientists have used to make their experiments work. Only their presence can help our own scientists to put these experiments into use for discoveries for the development of our own programs. There is a long list of discoveries which can be traced directly to international gatherings. Indeed, some of these discoveries had direct application to the production of weapons such as radar or the atomic bomb.

"(c) Scientific life in Western Europe is also harmed. The cutting down of visits of European scientists to the U. S. has an equally strong, if not stronger, damaging effect on the scientific life of Europe. The cross-fertilization is even more important for them than for us. It is an essential step in the education of a foreign scientist to spend some time at an American institution, to become acquainted with the type of instruments which we are using here and techniques which we have developed. It will enable him to understand American scientific literature and put the results to his own use. If the stream of visiting scientists from overseas is cut, the development of present European science will be seriously impaired.

"(d) The position of the U. S. abroad is seriously weakened. American scientific creativeness and productivity are two of the strongest sources of American reputation abroad. In spite of all attacks upon the U. S. A. abroad, American science is still considered to be the most rigorous, creative field of American culture. The present visa policy is strongly cutting into this reputation; not only does it prevent many foreign scientists from personal observation of American science, it also establishes a prejudice against it and a feeling of opposition. This effect has strong political implications. It is our policy to emphasize that the United States is an open country in contrast to Russia, that it has nothing to hide and that, in contrast to the Russian iron curtain, we are free and open to those who may criticize us as well as to our supporters. By means of the visa policy we are erecting on our side what French scientists have referred to as the 'uranium curtain'. We must not forget that the scientific and intellectual groups in Western Europe have relatively larger significance for the formation of public opinion than similar groups in American society. If these groups are alienated and given the impression that the U. S. A.

is a closed country which does not permit visitors to represent their own countries, European opinion will be strongly influenced against the United States. We are strengthening a growing attitude which considers America and Russia both equally evil powers to be feared. The type of questioning and grilling which accompanies our present visa procedures has been compared by many foreign scientists to similar methods used under the Nazi occupation or used by the Soviet bureaucracy. It is this looking into the private lives and interfering with the personal beliefs of citizens which made the totalitarian regimes so hated in Western Europe."

Industrial Atomic Power

AEC Accepts Dow-Detroit Edison Proposal

One of the four groups of industrial and utility firms to respond to the Atomic Energy Commission's invitation last year to engage in preliminary studies of the practicability of privately financed design, development, and possible operation of nuclear reactors for power production has, in the words of Atomic Energy Commissioner T. Keith Glennan, placed "an attractive proposal" before the AEC which has been accepted. Dow Chemical Company and Detroit Edison Company, operating as a team, have offered specifically to launch a \$250,000 program consisting of further studies and certain developmental work having to do with the industrial use of reactors for the production of power and fissionable materials.

Commissioner Glennan, speaking before the Southeastern Electric Exchange at Boca Raton, Florida on April 22nd, pointed out that the AEC has recently launched a second round of the power feasibility studies under its industrial participation program. "Through the medium of these continuing close contacts with private enterprise," he said, "we hope not only to add to the talent and technical ability of our own staff but also to gain somewhat from the competitive situation which will emerge in time. It is our opinion that, ultimately, business and industry should take over in this field. We believe that it is our responsibility to tackle only those problems which cannot suitably be handled by competition at this stage of the game or which we must tackle to discharge our national security responsibilities. Governmental activities should provide the fundamental knowledge necessary to permit the full blown operation of the private enterprise system. The government should not be carried away by its own importance nor should it attempt to direct the future course of an industry except as may be required for national defense.

"To aid in the administration of the industrial participation program and to expand the areas in which all types of industry may find an interest in the broad aspects of the nation's atomic energy program," Glennan continued, "the Commission is taking what I consider a really significant step. We are establishing, as of the first of May, the Office of Industrial Cooperation, re-