A Prodigious Inventory-Taking

The Select Committee on Government Research headed by Representative Elliott issued its first progress report on 17 February. This initial document came about 5 months after authorization of the study. During this period a substantial staff has been assembled, and hearings have been held involving some 75 expert witnesses. As a result, the committee has authorized its staff to begin work on ten separate studies.

The overall attitudes expressed in the progress report are relatively judicious and neutral. The following statements are indicative:

... the unparalleled wealth, the advanced state of health, and the myriad technological comforts we... enjoy... have been made possible by a... combination of encouragement and exploitation of research ...

The Federal Government’s marriage to research and development has been marked by an amazingly long and luxurious honeymoon. ... Noting the recently slackening annual increase of Federal funds... some say the honeymoon is over. Be that as it may, it is certain the marriage will endure.

There is one aspect of the report about which I have reservations. The progress report indicates that the principal effort of the committee will be devoted to a prodigious inventory-taking. This is revealed in the titles of the ten proposed studies and in their descriptions. The magnitude of the proposed endeavor is indicated in an outline for a statistical review of government research and development. The committee has instructed the staff to include in this study five major goals. One of these is “to survey the subject matter of all projects undertaken or supported by departments and agencies as well as the type of research or development undertaken.” The number of grants issued each year by the National Institutes of Health is about 15,000, and this agency is only one of many.

If the staff attains all the goals set out for it, the committee will be swamped with information. So vast will be this collection that it will be difficult to digest and analyze it in any reasonable length of time; surely it cannot be digested before December 1964, when the committee is scheduled to make its report. Indeed, to gather all the information outlined may take far more staff than is available. The only way this monstrous task could be accomplished is by requiring extensive cooperation by executive agencies of the government and other institutions.

Apparently the universities will not escape. Under the heading “Student Assistance in Higher Education,” we read:

Our staff has begun a study to determine the extent and direction of the Government’s financial assistance programs for students in American degree-granting colleges and universities. ... Concomitant to this inquiry, an exhaustive questionnaire to some 1,500 colleges and universities is contemplated which will be followed by selective personal staff contact.

There are at least three grounds for hope that the Elliott Committee will come up with a more reasonable set of objectives. One is the basic wisdom of the members. A second is the flexibility of the staff. A third is the recent appointment of a Science-Engineering Advisory Committee. This group includes, among others, George W. Beadle, J. W. Beams, Lloyd Berkner, Henry T. Heald, Albert B. Sabin, Max Tishler, and Charles H. Townes. The advice of this committee will have a constructive influence on the studies.—P.H.A.