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The Ford Budget: New Signals for Science?

One embattled federal budget director used to say that budgets achieve only the uniform distribution of dissatisfaction. The 1976 budget, the first by President Ford, is in part the customary recital of griefs and apprehensions. But it also invites some small celebrations. Not the least of these is the substantial buildup in funds for research and development.

The new spending authority for federal R & D is scheduled to cross the \$20 billion annual barrier in fiscal year 1976 and reach the level of \$22.6 billion. Actual money outlays within fiscal 1976 will be somewhat less, but still a substantial \$21.7 billion. The percentage rise from current levels is 15 percent in budget authority and 11 percent in outlays. True, the distribution pattern has a certain tiresome familiarity. Out of a \$2.8 billion increase, \$2.1 billion is for defense and space programs. About \$0.7 billion represents the increase for civilian R & D, a good part of which is mortgaged to inflation.

Still, the trend is favorable to science and engineering. Rising costs are acknowledged. The needs for greater research effort in energy, food, and transportation have not been ignored. The National Science Foundation came through the grinder in generally good shape. An important beginning has been provided for research in climate dynamics, a sign of awareness of the food production implications of climate changes and their consequent impact on world economic and political stability.

There never was a perfect budget. This one is no exception. Its economic strategy appears too cautious for the kind of year we face, but it has the admirable merit of recognizing the future economic risks of overstimulation. Its defense posture starts us on a new military buildup while we are still warming to the idea of détente. In the area of civilian science, the budget increases are targeted to such particular problems as energy and do not benefit general-purpose science across the board. Health research funds will be tighter, and university-based research will find little to cheer about. In fact, the treatment of the education sector generally is uninspired and disheartening, with sharp cuts in support for library resources and educational development. Congress will no doubt have a second thought in some of these areas.

However, some optimistic signs can be read into this budget. Somebody must be listening to the science adviser; the NSF science advisory apparatus obviously helped the Office of Management and Budget shape the R & D portions of the new budget. Priority judgments are being made and reflected in the budget. The antiscience aura of the two previous administrations seems to have disappeared with the transfer of the White House reins. The Ford budget offers a long-delayed opportunity for government and science to begin working together toward a long-range public policy approach to science and technology.

As Vice President Rockefeller ponders changes in the White House staff system to more effectively utilize science and technology in Executive branch policy-making, we hope he will think in these long-range terms. Science and engineering have a responsible and effective role to play at the presidential level in coping with the problems of choice on which the future hangs. These include the transnational questions of the uses of the sea, the environment, and the resources of the planet, together with the uses of science and technology in creating alternative social and economic structures which can help reduce dissatisfactions leading to conflict. All of them mingle science and technology with public policy.

We think we see fresh signals for science in the 1976 budget, but the real test is more than a quantitative growth in R & D dollars. The corner will be turned when the budget for science and technology is thought of and expressed less as a set of annual expenditure decisions and more as an investment strategy which matches the scale and intensity of the nation's agenda.—WILLIAM D. CAREY

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The Ford Budget: New Signals for Science?

William D. Carey

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