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## National Priorities: Round One to Basic Science

In President Ford's new budget for fiscal year 1977, basic science has fared very well. An increase of 11 percent in federal support is provided, along with a 9 percent rise in R & D funds going to colleges and universities. Reversing the early tilt toward heavy reductions in R & D support, the President and his budget advisers have managed to provide an \$800 million increase in civilian R & D in a total government budget that is notable for its austerity.

Several things can be said about the reasons for this unexpected outcome. The negotiations over the past year between the Congress and the White House, aimed toward restoring science policy machinery in the President's office, have helped to create a constructive policy dialogue on the role of government. The appointment of two distinguished White House advisory committees to brainstorm a science and technology policy agenda likewise has helped to broaden the thinking of the President's staff. Reactions from the scientific community to the Administration's severe initial cutbacks in research support induced second thoughts in high places. The Office of Management and Budget itself came to believe that basic research support had been allowed to slip below the level of sufficiency and, encouraged by the Vice President, became a potent champion of a substantial budget increase. This convergence of concerned parties, coming at the issues from varying backgrounds, has made the difference in the outcomes. If this fragile policy system can be held in place for a time, we may be able to get on with building a workable public policy future for science and technology.

Still, the R & D budget for 1977 is a long way from being settled. A President proposes, but the Congress disposes. The Executive Budget expresses the President's intentions and preferences, but it does not bind the Congress. In an election year the budget is a national battleground, especially when the President and the legislative majority are on opposite political sides. It is also well to recall that Mr. Ford went to Congress last year with an increased National Science Foundation budget for basic research and failed to get it through. If this happens again with the 1977 budget, it is doubtful that the budgeteers will have much zest to try a third time.

The budget for R & D is at risk for other reasons, this year. The President's overall budget, of which R & D funding is only a small part, is very tight. It puts a moratorium on new policy initiatives, and it cuts the "normal" 10 percent growth trend in half. It will dissatisfy those who prefer an expenditure policy which stimulates a slack national economy. It may not go down well to vote increases for basic science at the apparent expense of more politically beneficial programs which have been held level or reduced. In short, the R & D budget is excellent on paper but is very vulnerable indeed. When the strife starts on Capitol Hill, an extraordinary effort will be necessary if the science budget is not to be turned into a shambles.

These are the realities. Science and technology are harnessed to an unstable and fractious public policy system whose behavior is erratic. Because the budget process is not well understood, yet plays a vital role in the progress of science and technology, the AAAS is initiating a special *Report on the Federal R & D Budget for 1977*, which will be issued late this spring. It will be a first stage assessment, attempting to illuminate the decision-making process and identify some of the critical issues in the 1977 budget. With guidance from the Committee on Science and Public Policy, the report will aim to isolate and describe the policy assumptions underlying major funding choices, tentatively explore the future implications of current decisions on research and development, and put down a foundation for what may become an annual AAAS White Paper on the Federal Budget for R & D. This is a large order, perhaps too large, but we will take it as far as we can. The hope is that this effort, along with others, will help to edge policy-makers, scientists, and engineers closer to a time when long-range policy strategies for R & D can make the Winter Olympics of budgeting less hazardous.—WILLIAM D. CAREY, *Executive Officer, AAAS*