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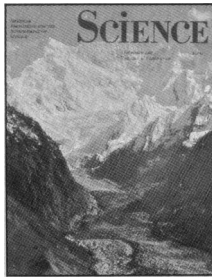
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COVER The upper part of the Bualtar Glacier, Karakoram Himalaya, descends 4,519 meters (14,800 feet) from Minapin Peak (7,250 meters above sea level). In the foreground, rockslide debris covers 4.1 square kilometers of the glacier. The glacier accelerated in and below this area several months after the rockslide occurred. Visible effects of this acceleration include heavy crevassing, over-steepened ice margins, and ponded meltwater drainage. See page 64. [Kenneth Hewitt, Snow and Ice Hydrology Project, Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3C5]

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Presidential Elections and the NSF Directorship

The separation of science from politics is a principle whose importance to the nation is worthy of frequent affirmation. However, the scientific community must also recognize that science exists in a political environment. The scientific leadership in the 1940s understood the distinction between engaging in partisan politics and understanding the political process. Otherwise it could not have succeeded in the political negotiations that led to the creation of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1950. One purpose of those negotiations was to use the political process itself to shield NSF from party politics by giving it characteristics novel for a government agency. Designation of the agency as a "foundation" was one such characteristic. Equally important was the establishment of a 6-year term for the NSF director, a very unusual arrangement in a federal agency.

Prior to World War II, most support for basic research came either from a university's own funds or from one of the private philanthropic foundations. In 1945, when Vannevar Bush and his colleagues sought to legitimize federal support for scientific research in nongovernment institutions, they conceived the idea of a publicly supported foundation governed by a distinguished, part-time, presidentially appointed board of directors; namely, the National Science Board.* By designating the proposed agency as a foundation, they meant to convey a clear signal that government support for science had to be free from partisan politics.

President Truman demonstrated his understanding and respect for the intent inherent in the word "foundation" by establishing an important precedent: the NSF director should be selected on the basis of scientific credentials and administrative ability rather than on grounds of ideological purity or for payment of a political debt. That precedent was consistent with the intent of a Congress in mandating a 6-year term for the NSF director to decouple that appointment from the 4-year presidential election cycle.

Truman's precedent turned out to be good politics as well as wise policy. In 1969 President Nixon reversed his announced intention to nominate Franklin Long as the third NSF director because of Long's opposition to the deployment of an antiballistic missile system. Both the scientific community and Congress vigorously protested what they regarded as a blatant attempt to politicize the NSF. With that single exception, all of Truman's successors in the Oval Office have followed his precedent with respect to the appointment of the NSF director. Nor has any newly inaugurated president ever asked the NSF director to resign.

But NSF is a government agency, despite its uniqueness. And the presidentially appointed head of any government agency has to understand and work within a political environment if that agency is to succeed in the battle for scarce resources. In that respect, the task of the NSF director is particularly sensitive. The scientific community quite properly regards him as a principal spokesman within government for the national research system. Therefore, he is often obliged to walk a tightrope between effective science advocacy and partisan politics. Erich Bloch, the present NSF director, has displayed his understanding of the changing political environment in which NSF functions, as well as a considerable talent for walking that tightrope. He has been willing to take controversial positions and make provocative statements in emphasizing the importance of a vigorous scientific system. Some of his decisions have distressed and even angered members of the scientific community, but those are the occupational hazards of operating in a political environment.

The nonpartisan character of NSF deserves the continued support of both political parties. As the external environment for science becomes increasingly complex, Truman's wise precedent with respect to the NSF directorship should be taken to heart by the new administration. After the election, the president-elect should quickly establish the fact that he expects Director Bloch to complete the remaining 2 years of his 6-year term. This action by the president-elect would send a strong signal to the scientific community that he understands the historical reasons for a 6-year term and the need to maintain a separation between science and politics.—RICHARD C. ATKINSON, *Chancellor, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093*

*V. Bush, *Science: The Endless Frontier* (National Science Foundation, Washington, DC, 1980), pp. 31–40.