PUBLIC POLICY

State Department Science: How Good?

Failure to fill top advisory post in 28 months arouses questions of the quality of advice available to diplomats.

by Frank Sartwell

Science and technology have been important to foreign policy since before there was a United States. This country picked up its three-mile limit on territorial waters from Europeans who pragmatically decided that the range of shore-based cannon was the effective limit of sovereignty. (These diplomats got bad technological advice; cannon of that day couldn't really shoot that far.)

Today, with diplomats involved with more abstruse problems in atomic weapons and power, test pacts, antimissile developments, arms control, economic assistance, and what-will-Red-China-do-next, science must be taken into account in a thousand ways by the State Department. And the science must be quite a bit better than an incorrect estimate of a gun's range.

To provide technical advice, the State Department has its own Office of International Scientific and Technological Affairs, as well as ready help from other, more scientifically-oriented agencies.

And there, some critics feel, is the rub. Is State's science good enough? Is it strong enough to withstand the pressures from powerful agencies like the Atomic Energy Commission and National Aeronautics and Space Administration, as well as from its own bureaucrats, and still present technically well-informed foreign policy views for the consideration of the President?

There are many, in the Capitol, at State itself, even in the White House, who say it is. Some disagree.

The critics point first to the fact that State's top scientific post has been vacant for two years and four months —perhaps because it just isn't "top" enough. When Dr. Ragnar Rollefson, in September 1964, left the job to return to his physics at the University of Wisconsin, there were plans to upgrade the directorship to Assistant Secretary of State for Science. This would mean a little more pay ($26,000 instead of $25,000), perhaps better access to the Secretary of State (although the director, by organizational fiat, ranks with an assistant secretary, and attends the same meetings with the Secretary), and certainly more prestige.

Since the plans were widely known, several top men approached for the post shied off when State did not, in fact, upgrade the post (which would have required an act of Congress.)

State officials scoff at the idea that they are "unable to fill the post." Some 30 men have been considered, some self-nominated. None, State feels, is so well qualified as to warrant a change in the present system. The Department has felt little urgency to fill the job, officials say, because "Herman Pollack has done such a fine job" as acting director. Pollack, a career civil servant, is given high marks as an administrator.

During his tenure, the Department can point to quite a few advances. The scientific attache program in U.S. embassies has been strengthened. A series of luncheons bringing together the Secretary and prominent scientists has been inaugurated. (Among the subjects: computers and atomic power.)

An exchange of personnel between State, NASA, AEC, Commerce, and the National Science Foundation has been begun, aimed at getting each agency to understand the others and their problems. In addition, Pollack instituted a series of "Secretary's Science Briefings" which include scientists and the top 40 or so department officials.

One old problem has vanished. Some years ago, foreign scientists suspected of any Communist taint had difficulty getting visas to attend conferences in the United States. That has ended.

"I feel we have made the voice of science louder within the department," says Arthur E. Pardee Jr., executive director.

One staff member of the White House's Office of Science and Technology says of his opposite numbers at State: "I have the feeling of a group of people beavering away at problems with good effect."

But critics of the present organization are not so sure. A leader among them is Eugene B. Skolnikoff, associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a former staff member of the OST. In the magazine Science, he has written:

"Even if a new man is found, the uneven performance of the science office since its resurrection in 1958 . . . raises doubts as to the real value of existing scientific advisory apparatus." In his view, the Department's scientific advisers too often find their prerogatives pre-empted or their advice overwhelmed by the "hard-science" agencies which have no basic foreign policy responsibilities.

One scientist in the White House dismisses the recent achievements of the office, as "busy work," to which State relegates scientists. Unless the right man takes over at the top of State's scientific office, he feels, State will continue to be a responding body instead of an initiating body in the field.

Although President Johnson, like President Kennedy before him, would certainly not take an international step without consulting State, "The Secretary would not consider getting technological advice from his science adviser on a question like disarmament—or on armament for that matter. He would turn instead to his military affairs officer."

This scientist declares the situation a vicious cycle—unless a top flight man who can get ready access to the Secretary on matters of high policy takes the job it will remain relatively without influence. And no top flight man wants to take an influenceless job.

One outside observer, close to the situation, characterizes the differences between State and the scientific community as being an accusation by the Secretary that the community has failed to support him, in that no science adviser has been provided. He is answered by the scientists declaring that "you haven't made the job what it should be" to attract the right sort of man.

With State apparently satisfied with its science imput, the office will doubtless go along under Pollack until the "perfect" man is found—a scientist with heavy credentials in foreign policy. There aren't a great many of them around, and most would, it appears, rather think of themselves—(and be treated like)—an Assistant Secretary of State than as the director of an office, if they would consider putting up with the State Department at all.