

Science and the White House Reexamining the roles

Science adviser's resignation, rumors of shakeups
in OST and PSAC produce uncertain climate

January in Washington is usually a time of stress. Government officials are afraid to talk, answer the telephone or even think out loud about the President's budget for the new fiscal year—announced at the end of the month. But this year it is worse than ever, as one by one top Government advisers and officials announce their resignations or are assigned to new posts. A hint of what else is to come was President Nixon's announcement last week of the creation of a super cabinet that would cut across traditional agency lines and his reiterated intention to reduce the staffs of many agencies.

One of the most unexpected announcements was the resignation of Edward E. David Jr., the President's science adviser. "I knew about it when I read it in the paper," said one member of PSAC, the President's Science Advisory Committee, which David chaired. But at the time David's departure was made public, published reports were speculating that the Office of Science and Technology (OST), which he directs, would subsequently be trimmed and phased into another branch of the executive branch such as the Office of Management and Budget. There was also speculation that Nixon would accept the resignations of the members of PSAC.

Nixon is said to have offered David another job in the Government. But David opted instead to become vice president and director of Gould, Inc., a Chicago manufacturer of electronic equipment. Some sources said David's resignation was not in anger but due to disappointment that his advice had not been heeded. Others said there was no acrimony whatsoever. David, already at his job in Chicago, did not respond to requests for amplification.

What all this means to science and its representation at the highest levels of Government is not clear. But changes are probably inevitable. "We strongly

suspect that the traditional PSAC will not continue. What form it will take we don't know," says one member of the 20-man committee. There are several reasons: changing times, shifting roles of advisory committees and changing relationships between the adviser and advisee (SN: 10/7/72, p. 236), rethinking on the relevance of advice itself, and the Administration's less than enthusiastic attitude toward science and technology in general.

Twenty years ago when PSAC was created, the committee spent most of its time looking into basic science related to military research. Now PSAC studies are oriented more to social problems such as health care, transportation and energy sources.

While the problems have changed, so have attitudes about advisory groups as a whole. "There have been some difficult times in the past," says one PSAC member. "The relationship between PSAC and the President has been slowly deteriorating over the last 10 years." This reference was to occasions when PSAC members were outspoken in their criticism of the Government's military and Vietnam policy. "The President doesn't take advice that is negative to the policy he is already pursuing. Even when the advice is objective [which is rare], he weighs it politically," added an ex-member. But most feel they ought to have a mechanism to give the advice anyway. PSAC is a symbol of that scientific prestige at the White House.

Does the President need advice? A remarkable number of members of the current establishment say no. They contend what he needs is a small group that can study the possibilities in an unbiased way and present to him his options and the results of pursuing a given course. "This is an analyzed approach," explains one Government official. "All advice ends up as special pleading no matter what you are talk-



OST
David: Two years in the White House.

ing about. And special pleading does not help the President make decisions," he asserted. "Why have a special committee for science?" he asks. "Science is not a separate thing, but an approach to doing things."

Most feel even if PSAC is dissolved, the professional staff of about 22 members of OST will still be around—either intact or reduced, or absorbed somewhere else in the Government. The new budget should tell the story. Meanwhile, the scientific community and Washington remain in a state of suspended animation. □

NASA orders cutbacks, satellite project killed

NASA announced last week it is cutting \$200 million out of its current expenditures—action "required to reduce total Government spending to the \$250 billion target set by the President for fiscal year 1973." But one despondent scientist remarked: "This is just the pruning before the real amputations begin."

NASA said it was making the cuts now—only a month in advance of the President's 1974 budget proposal "to save the maximum amount of money." This, NASA-watchers took as an ill omen for the 1974 budget. Congress had approved \$3.4 billion for the 1973 fiscal year to end in June, but the current cuts bring the budget back to \$3.2 billion.

The cuts affect all areas of NASA research and development, including the space shuttle, which will be slowed down, delaying the first orbital flight. But the biggest blow to science was the announced "suspension" of work on the High Energy Astronomy Observatory (HEAO), originally scheduled to fly in 1975. Its life was in jeopardy last year as well, when the ax fell instead on the planetary Grand Tour (SN:1/