

Restoring the Oracle of Science

When the APhA member pays his or her annual membership dues, that member is helping to support or "buy"—among other benefits, services, and programs—a certain amount of representation in the halls of Congress and the offices of the federal executive agencies. Such representation includes offering advice, technical counsel, and scientific persuasion to those in government.

We recently read an article in the Sunday magazine section of *The Washington Post*, the thesis of which is that no one in Washington really has "power" in the usual sense of the word. What they do have is "access," and "access" translates into "influence," which is the true common denominator in politics as practiced in Washington, D.C. Consequently, the success of organizations in the nation's capital is largely dependent upon how well those organizations are able to establish access to the right people and, in turn, exert influence over those people *via* that access.

In the case of APhA—as with other national health care and scientific membership societies—representation at the national political level is only one of several equally important purposes or objectives of the organization. And, within that sphere, representation and influence regarding scientific matters and technical issues constitutes an even more limited scope of activity and basis for APhA's existence.

In contrast, the geographic "next-door neighbor" to APhA on Constitution Avenue is the National Academy of Sciences—National Research Council (NAS–NRC). This venerable institution was chartered by Congress and President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 with the express purpose of serving as a, if not "the," private-sector science advisory body for the federal government. But many things have changed over the past 120 years.

The federal government itself has grown immensely and in that growth has added all sorts of technical, scientific, and research groups to its regulatory agencies, to the cabinet executive departments, and in the support services provided to Congress as the legislative wing of the United States government. For example, in the health area, these groups range from the Food and Drug Administration's National Center for Drugs and Biologics, to the National Institutes of Health, to the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment. Moreover, a host of independent or quasi-independent bodies have also sprung up including the National Science Foundation, The Brookings Institute, the Carnegie Institution, the Rand Corporation, and so on. Finally, since approximately the end of the World War II era, most U.S. Presidents have recognized the value of appointing a special Science Advisor to the President or having a Presidential Office of Science Policy.

So no longer is there any shortage of science advice and willing and eager science advisors on the Washington political scene. Indeed, they often aggressively compete among and between themselves for attention, visibility, and the opportunity to be heard even if their advice may not be accepted or followed.

All of this has spelled trouble—with a capital "T"—for the prestigious NAS–NRC. Its prominence and reputation went unchallenged for many years, and, as in the case with many venerable and stodgy institutions of a by-gone era, it was ill-prepared to meet the onslaught of competition from younger, more vigorous, and more aggressive purveyors of scientific counsel and technical advice. Unsurprisingly, the result is that NAS–NRC has gone into at least a partial eclipse as its once undisputed position suddenly declined.

Thirteen years ago, an effort to reverse this situation was started when Philip Handler was named NAS–NRC President. Although he happened to be a distinguished biochemist, that facet of his background was incidental to his new assignment. Basically, what was needed was a skilled administrator—which Handler generally proved to be—and his past reputation as a research biochemist was simply a bonus that helped him to open doors, gain attention, and win the respect of his scientific peers.

But years of benign neglect and an activist and often hostile climate of operation limited what any one leader could accomplish. Due to economic considerations, the NAS–NRC day-to-day operation was forced to undertake fee-for-service activities numbering in the hundreds but almost all of extremely narrow scope. The hundreds of committees, panels, and boards were all diligently studying and dissecting the trees while ignoring the forest.

Science and Government Report, a Washington-based publication that describes itself as "The Independent Bulletin of Science Policy," devoted much of one of its 1982 issues to a close look at the NAS–NRC in an article titled "Academy of Sciences Stakes Out a New Role." Editor Daniel S. Greenberg reviewed and analyzed what he characterized as the "institutional shaking, headrolling, and reorganizing that's going on at the venerable NAS."

It is Greenberg's thesis that Handler's successor, former Presidential Science Advisor Frank Press, is trying to reshape the Academy and to restore it to its former position "as the high temple of science." Greenberg sees the new NAS president as having a markedly different agenda than that followed during the Handler era.

"In Press's vision of the Academy of the future, the institution would focus its scholarly resources on big issues and eventually get out of the role of job shop for any government agency that wants to hire its prestige . . . Press would like to see the Academy revert to its early role as a staging area for science's political interests in Washington. Lots of wheeling and dealing aimed at starting or stopping something on the federal scene used to go on at the Academy."

But the key to being able to pull off such a change is money. It was the "job shop" projects that paid the bills for the Academy to operate over the past generation or longer. Without the infusion of a lot of financial donations from some philanthropic source, there will not be the wherewithal to do what Press is described as trying to accomplish.

And in a budget-tight economy, with an Administration looking for every place to cut further on expenditures, the prospect of Uncle Sam becoming Santa Claus is extremely remote.

Moreover, to date the Reagan Administration has shown little desire, need, or interest in tapping any outside source for the purpose of major shaping of science policy.

Collectively, all of this projects a relatively dismal prognosis for the NAS. Academy President Press will need to muster not only his considerable personal administrative talents, but also the strong and unified support of the entire scientific community, if the NAS is to regain its former exalted position as the pinnacle of science policy.

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