

March 26, 1962

Dr. Detlev W. Bronk  
President  
National Academy of Sciences  
2101 Constitution Avenue  
Washington 25, D.C.

MEMO: Reply to your letter of January 16.

I can only state my own views.

1. The academy can best serve the nation by divesting itself as far as possible of its present routine administrative and consultative duties. The importance of science in national policy is now very well recognized and there seem to be ample institutions for advice and review within the executive branches of the government without requiring the duplicate structure of Academy involvement. The academy has historically acquired a large number of routine and continuing functions that could better be left to administrative bodies within the government.

2. I have serious forebodings about the likely success of the recent Committee on Government Policy. As I understand it this was established primarily to act as a source of science advice to the legislative branch comparable to the excellent advice now available to the executive. This is certainly a very worthy objective, but I am very dubious whether the Committee as indicated will be able to make a very effective contribution to it. A publically announced body of this kind will inevitably find itself identified with one or another issue of serious political content, and I do not see how it will be able to function responsibly to a series of congressional committees of alternating political orientation. One of the principal responsibilities of the president of the Academy is to establish a personal reputation for integrity and non-partisanship that will lead Congress to turn to him as a matter of course for advice on where to obtain objective scientific consultation. But I think it is expecting too much to expect Congress to accept the Academy's formal designees in the structure of such a committee as the place where Congress must get its advice. It is, of course, precisely on the basis of the same issues that the President has nominated his own scientific advisory committee rather than rely upon the pre-established nominations of the Academy for advice to the Executive.

3. I believe there may be a strong argument for maintaining the Presidency of the Academy as a part time job. If as I have already indicated, and continue to hope, the Academy can establish itself as a kind of court of last resort for objective evaluation of issues, as they arise on a strictly

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ad hoc basis, it will be able to contribute a service that is quite unique and beyond the capacity of any other organization.. But it can only do this if its participation in policy recommendation is of ad hoc character so that the governing bodies of the Academy do not become identified with any particular party line on the basis of past orientation. This objective is, of course, quite compatible with a full time presidency and staff, but I believe there are all too many instances where the staff tends to proliferate and make work for itself that may more properly belong in other quarters, and a validly part time organization, or at least top leadership may tend to avert this danger.

I realize that these recommendations represent a substantial reversal in the way the Academy has tended to evolve during the past years. However, I would not make such proposals if I did not feel that many of the more routine functions of the Academy were not already very well served by other organizations. The Academy has, of course, played a most important part already in bringing this about.

With cordial regards,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

P.S. A corollary to my previous remarks is that the Academy can be most effective where it takes the initiative itself rather than performing a task set for it by the government. One very serious problem that only a body like the Academy could undertake is the serious impact of scientists' involvement in policy on their effectiveness in their University functions. I am sure that you are not insensitive to this yourself. We are all willing to make substantial personal sacrifices. It is not always certain that we have exercised the best judgement in how to allocate our time as between the laboratory and classroom and the committee room in Washington. In any event, we should be taking strenuous measures to insure that academic time is used efficiently in such diversionary functions and there is certainly plenty of evidence to the contrary. It is always possible to justify the existence of another committee, even when it goes over much of the same ground as another committee in some other branch. But I am not convinced that this point is made emphatically enough to take proper account of the total costs. In any case, the quality of the people involved in science policy could be very much improved if it were manifest that their time would be jealously conserved and efficiently applied.

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