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A President Needs Discreet Science Advisers

To the Editor:

In "Back to Science Advisers" (Op-Ed, May 17), Hans A. Bethe and John Bardeen argue for restoring the President's science advisory committee, which was dismantled by President Nixon in 1972. I agree that the lack of such a committee has seriously diminished the quality, breadth and impact of scientific advice to the President in an era when those are most needed. The authors did not, however, explore some political realities that must be recognized if a science advisory committee is to be effective.

Above all is the authentic need for a President to have advisers whose discretion and confidence can be trusted, however deeply they may disagree with him on specific issues. He deserves advisers who can bring well-informed critical views to executive policy making. He is unlikely to confide in them, however, if they criticize his judgments in public, as well as in private counsels. Even if they meticulously respect national-security classification of data, their position will give them advantages in public debate that a President would be loath to enhance for his critics. But their prestige should also not be exploited to win political support for the President's final policy positions.

Discreet counselors can be found at least as readily among scientists as

among domestic and foreign-policy advisers. Academic scientists may be exposed to special pressures on campus, from the press and Congress that could undermine their confidential relationship with the President. Many, especially those critical of an administration's policies, may find the prospect of being muzzled in public expression of their private views difficult. These problems were nevertheless successfully faced during the 1950's and 60's, when the advisory committee thrived.

Mr. Bethe and Mr. Bardeen are among this country's most respected scientists. They have, as is entirely appropriate, publicly voiced their own convictions critical of the Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars"). It would have helped clarify the case for a Presidential science advisory committee if they had also articulated how members of such a committee might not have the same privilege. JOSHUA LEDERBERG
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