

PSAC's dilemma.

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Scientists are eager to furnish the most expert advice to the President, especially on technical matters on which they can speak with particular authority. Many of us urge the reestablishment of PSAC. As a prior condition, however, we must also understand his authentic need to have advisers whose discretion and confidence can be trusted, however deeply they may disagree with him on specific issues. To ensure that all of the relevant options and contingencies are thought about, nothing is more valuable than a candid devil's advocacy, which may be born out of principled dissent with his policies, but should be openminded and restrained to be able to understand his logic as well. The most hostile opponents need not be sought on every issue; there will be ample dissent if any broadly constituted, experienced group of independent thinkers is recruited. He is unlikely to confide in them, however, if they criticize his judgments in public as well as in private counsels. Their prestige as members of PSAC will give them advantages in public debate that a president would be loath to enhance for his openly avowed critics. Unlike full-time appointees, they do not expect to resign if the president decides contrary to their deepest convictions; but if they speak out inappropriately, they imperil the privilege of the executive's confidence. The other side of the bargain is that the president not exploit his confidential advisers to win political support.

There is no way that advice of any kind can be forced on a reluctant president. One of our tasks is to revive a modus operandi that will show that the national interest is not in irreconcilable conflict with his political imperatives -- and that better and more commendable, even more voteworthy, government will be the result.

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