Science and Policy

Science and technology help shape our world. They can enhance our lives, our safety, and the environment. But used irresponsibly, research can pose serious ethical dilemmas, too. AAAS long has promoted the responsible use of science and technology by providing policy-makers and others with sound scientific information and access to informed specialists.

Enhancing Science and Security
If policy-makers have questions about the security of liquefied natural gas, the feasibility of the hafnium isomer bomb, vaccine production, or other technical issues, they can get answers from the AAAS Center for Science, Technology, and Security Policy. Launched with a $2.25 million grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Center provides policy-makers with objective information on issues ranging from nuclear waste to pulsed fast-neutron analysis. Directed by Norman Neureiter, former top science adviser to the U.S. State Department, the Center has held various private and public briefings, such as a tutorial on lasers that was requested by the office of U.S. Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.).

S&T Fellows Make Their Mark
In 1973, AAAS Treasurer Emeritus William T. Golden bought the Science and Technology Policy Fellowships program its “first tank of gas” and pushed for its creation. Since then, more than 1,500 scientists and engineers have competed fiercely for the Fellowships to fill positions throughout the U.S. government. The program’s 30th anniversary in 2004 was marked with a symposium, “Vision 2033: Linking Science and Policy for Tomorrow’s World,” featuring the Honorable Sam Nunn, co-chair of the Nuclear Threat Initiative. Each year, the program places some 60 Ph.D. scientists in policy roles.

An Open Forum on S&T
Contrasting views from U.S. Sen. Tom Daschle (D-SD) and U.S. Presidential Science Adviser John H. Marburger III enlivened the 2004 Forum on Science and Technology Policy. “We stand at a pivotal moment,” a front-page New York Times article quoted Daschle as telling Forum attendees. “For all our past successes, there are disturbing signs that America’s dominant position in the scientific world is being shaken.” Daschle accused the Administration of short-changing science. Marburger rejected the charge, citing President George W. Bush’s science and technology accomplishments. Shirley Ann Jackson, head of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and then AAAS president, warned that the aging S&T workforce, U.S. students’ waning interest in science, and a drop in foreign students all bode poorly for future U.S. competitiveness. See www.aaas.org/forum.
Climate Change Qs & AAAs
Top climate-change experts convened by AAAS and Science in 2004 urged immediate, nonpartisan action to reduce global warming caused by human activities such as fossil-fuel burning. While some still dispute the risk, experts said the science is clear: The world is significantly warmer today — and getting warmer. Without action, U.K. Chief Scientific Adviser Sir David King warned in Science, we must prepare for coastal flooding, reduced crop yields, and more climate-related illness. In response, with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Conference Board, AAAS organized an all-star panel to participate in congressional staff briefings as well as a free, public event at AAAS and an international news conference.

Leading the Way in Washington
The well-regarded AAAS Center for Science, Technology, and Congress (CSTC) serves as a voice of scientific leadership on a broad range of issues — from the dangers of genetic discrimination and visa bottlenecks affecting foreign students, to the importance of independent peer review. Like the AAAS R&D Budget and Policy Program, which prepares authoritative analyses to inform fiscal planning, CSTC offers timely, nonpartisan information on current S&T issues. The Center was established in 1994, thanks to a grant from the Burroughs-Wellcome Fund.

Science and U.S. Politics
During the campaign season, AAAS organized a nonpartisan forum where representatives of the two primary U.S. candidates for president shared views on a range of science and technology issues. In a front-page New York Times article, AAAS Science and Policy Director Albert Teich explained that during a U.S. presidential campaign, “It’s essential that policy-makers and taxpayers understand the impacts of any federal budget changes,” especially those with implications for the pace of scientific discovery. A second, post-election event, plus a voter-technology workshop, co-organized by AAAS’s Education and Human Resources staff, kept the Association at the forefront of science policy issues in 2004. See www.aaas.org/news/press_room/election.

“Perhaps the best measure of the program’s success is the ubiquity of former fellows inside the Beltway today. Ten of about 50 staff members on the House Science Committee — including the committee’s deputy chief of staff — are former fellows, as is one member of Congress.”
—Rick Weiss, reporting in The Washington Post on the 30th anniversary of the AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellowships

“The AAAS Forum is the gold-standard event for anyone who needs to keep a finger on the pulse of R&D spending trends or political issues affecting the scientific community.”
—Prof. Neal Lane of Rice University, former science adviser to the Clinton Administration