

**nature**

25 August 1977

## Believing in OSTP's merits

PRESIDENT Carter last month sent Congress a proposal to reorganise the constellation of offices and advisory units which together constitute his immediate White House and Executive Office staff. The proposal is the first of many promised moves to streamline and prune the federal bureaucracy, a pledge which figured prominently in Mr Carter's campaign rhetoric. For the fledgling Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), the most important outcome of the proposed reorganisation is that it will be kept in business.

That fact alone signifies that OSTP has made an impression in the Carter administration during its short lifetime, for it is widely acknowledged that the people who planned the reorganisation were initially disposed to recommend that the office be disbanded. According to Dr Frank Press, Carter's science adviser and director of OSTP, the reorganisers approached the office as disbelievers, but went away as believers in OSTP's merits.

One reason for that belief is that Press has established a close working relationship with other White House units and he seems to enjoy easy access to the President, a fact which adds considerably to his standing in the White House power structure. He attends Cabinet meetings and daily meetings of Carter's senior staff, and OSTP is always represented during budget negotiations between agencies which have responsibility for R & D and the Office of Management and Budget. In addition, OSTP has been called upon to undertake a raft of studies ranging from a review of dam safety regulations to a survey of basic research policies in mission oriented agencies. Clearly, OSTP has established a solid niche.

Nevertheless, the reorganisation plan does not leave OSTP entirely unscathed. It will remove a number of functions specifically consigned to OSTP in the legislation which established the office last year, and it will result in a reduction of OSTP's staff level from the congressionally authorised 32 positions to 22. The net effect of the pruning will be to preserve and perhaps even strengthen those provisions related to the day-to-day advice to the President and other White House units, while stripping away some responsibilities for analysing longer term issues.

Although those losses may seem like a small price to pay for retaining OSTP in the White House, they are cause for concern. In fact, there has recently been some grumbling from OSTP's chief sponsors on Capitol Hill,

notably Olin Teague, chairman of the House Committee on Science and Technology, and Senator Adlai Stevenson, chairman of the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Science, Technology and Space. Both have sent letters to the chairmen of the House and Senate Government Operations Committees, which will be reviewing the reorganisation plan, expressing concern at the potential loss of some of OSTP's functions.

Specifically, the reorganisation plan would relieve OSTP of the responsibility for preparing two reports, a five-year outlook identifying problems and issues likely to require attention in the years ahead, and a series of annual reports reviewing developments in science and technology and assessing selected government programmes. Both those tasks will now be undertaken by the National Science Foundation, which is probably as well equipped as OSTP to write such reports, but studies carrying a White House imprimatur would carry much more weight.

The reorganisation plan would also do away with the President's Committee on Science and Technology (PCST), a top-level advisory committee similar to the former powerful President's Science Advisory Committee. PCST was established by Congress primarily to conduct a two-year review of federal science policies and to recommend organisational changes in the federal bureaucracy dealing with science and technology. At the end of PCST's review, Carter would have had the option of keeping the committee as a permanent advisory body.

The committee will be scrapped chiefly because a White House unit is already looking at government reorganisation—having a separate committee looking into the organisation of science agencies was deemed superfluous. Nevertheless, the committee's demise will remove a potentially important source of outside opinion particularly on longer term issues which lie beyond the day-to-day matters facing the White House.

When Congress created OSTP last year, it gave it the dual role of advising the President and other White House units on issues involving science and technology, and of providing long range analysis of broad questions concerned with science and social policy. The reorganisation seems to have strengthened the first role by ensuring that the Science Adviser will have a secure place in the upper echelons of the White House. But the second function has been downgraded. □