USA

# Department store

*David Davies reports from Washington on the new US Department of Energy*

THE Department of Energy, the twelfth Cabinet agency of the United States, comes into being on 1 October. Proposed by President Carter on 1 March of this year, the department will be headed by Secretary James Schlesinger. It will have almost 20,000 employees and a first-year budget of $10,400 million. An amalgam of several agencies, most notably the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA) and the Federal Energy Agency, the new department's structure is a little unusual in that it is divided along functional lines rather than technological lines. Thus technologies will move through different parts of the department as they progress from basic research through development and into commercial implementation.

Responsibility for basic research will lie, in large measure, in the Office of Energy Research, which will manage basic science programmes both within the department's own laboratories and in the universities. The Director of this office will be Professor John Deutch, a physical chemist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Deutch, 39, is no stranger to the Washington scene. In the 1960s he worked as a systems analyst in the Department of Defense, and consulted for the Bureau of the Budget. He has been a part-time member of the Defense Science Board, most recently as its Vice-Chairman. But he declares, indeed promises, that in several years time he will be back doing chemistry.

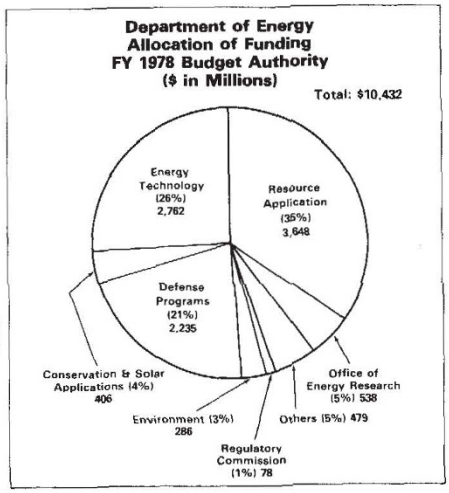
In the meantime he will play four major roles. He will provide Schlesinger with technical advice on basic science issues. He will co-ordinate all the department's basic research, some of which will obviously be done outside the immediate orbit of his office. He will be responsible for the well-being of all the department's 144 laboratories (excluding the weapons laboratories). And he will be responsible for the financial support of basic research.

A very substantial fraction of the basic research money at present goes to high energy and nuclear physics, and clearly the future of this research is not too closely tied to immediate questions of energy policy. But in fiscal year 1977, $125 million was spent in basic energy research, divided roughly 7 : 3 between governmental laboratory and university recipients. There is little doubt that this sum will rise sharply in the next few years; already federal financial obligations to energy R&D as a whole in fiscal year 1978 are seen as rising by at least 10% in real terms over the 1977 figure.

The department has an Under Secretary and six Assistant Secretaries on the technical side. Subject to confirmation, the Under Secretary, who will oversee all the programmes but have a special brief for energy conservation, is Dale Myers, at present a Vice-President of Rockwell International. Apart from basic research the Assistant Secretaries also cover energy technology; resource applications, with responsibility for the commercial introduction of new technology; conservation and solar applications, a contact point for individual inventors and small businesses; environment, with responsibility for ensuring that programmes comply with environmental health and safety regulations and with the authority to conduct related research; and defence programmes, directing nuclear weapons research and investigations into laser fusion. □

MIT

*Research director : John Deutch*




# DNA bill delay

RECENT moves on Capitol Hill have created further confusion in the already contorted story of the various pieces of pending legislation to control recombinant DNA research in the United States. In the House of Representatives, the bill drafted by Rep. Paul Rogers' Health subcommittee was scheduled for consideration by the Commerce Committee last week and was not expected to run into much trouble. Commerce chairman Harley Staggers postponed consideration of the bill, however, and suggested that important amendments might be required. Further amendments have been proposed by other committee members. The chances that the bill will be approved by the committee and reach the floor of the House before the end of the legislative session have now diminished almost to zero.

In the Senate the situation is more confusing. The Kennedy bill which was already running into trouble with Senators concerned about its bureaucratic provisions has been removed from the legislative calendar. Senator Kennedy now proposes to set up a Study Commission composed of interested members of lay and scientific organisations to consider the best form of legislation. As a stopgap, a simple measure to give the NIH guidelines the force of law would be enacted. This would apparently contain no enforcement provisions but would apply to industry as well as government-financed research. The position of the bill recently drafted by Senator Gaylord Nelson, which is similar in many respects to the House bill (see *Nature*, 1 September) is not clear, although it does not now appear to be gathering sufficient support for passage this session.

In addition Senator Adlai Stevenson III, as chairman of the Subcommittee on Science, Technology and Space of the Senate Commerce Committee, has announced hearings on the effect of the proposed legislation; at the same time he expressed strong misgivings about the pending bills and their effect on basic research and freedom of scientific enquiry.

All these moves owe something to the lobbying efforts of some scientists and scientific societies, together with statements on the relative risks and benefits of recombinant DNA research from a number of scientific meetings over the summer. More battles are in store before legislation finally emerges.

**Sandy Grimwade**