

ATOMIC ENERGY

Seaborg to Leave AEC

by our Washington Correspondent

DR GLENN T. SEABORG, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission for the past decade, will leave the AEC next year, probably in November, to return to the University of California at Berkeley. His resignation, which was announced recently, was obviously expected in the White House, for President Nixon wasted little time in making public his choice for a successor, and sent the name of James R. Schlesinger, an assistant director of the Office of Management and Budget and a lifelong Republican, to the Senate for approval. Seaborg pointed out in his letter of resignation that last year he expressed the desire to return to California to resume his research on transuranium elements—research for which he won the Nobel Prize in 1951.

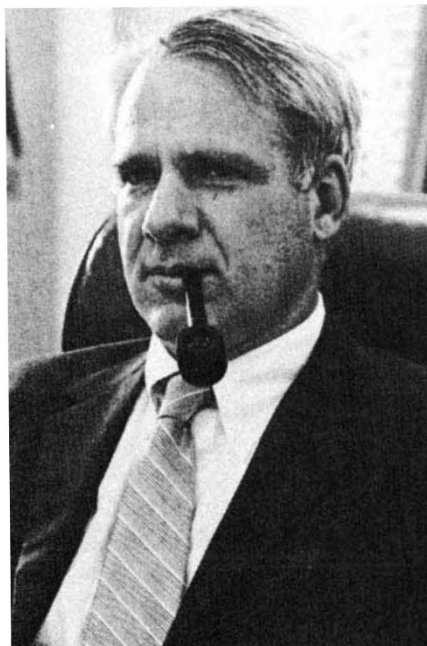
Although Nixon accepted Seaborg's resignation "with regret", and was unstinting in his praise for Seaborg's record of achievements at the AEC, it has been suggested that he was looking for a change of leadership for the commission. During the past year, the AEC's nuclear energy programme has faced mounting opposition from environmentalists, and strong doubts have been cast on its nuclear safety programme. Nevertheless, Seaborg has skilfully ensured that the AEC's programme has gone forward largely unmodified, and there is little doubt that he has served the commission well during his ten years in office.

Seaborg is the president-elect of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a position to which he was elected last December in the face of considerable opposition from some members of the association. The chief complaint raised against his candidacy was that as head of a much criticized government agency, he would find a conflict of interest in many of the issues with which the AAAS is involved—the issue of reactor safety which the AAAS was asked by Senator Edmund Muskie to investigate, for example. Few, however, opposed his election on personal grounds, and his resignation from the AEC may help to assuage those fears, although for the major part of his term of office at the AAAS, which starts on January 1, 1972, he will be wearing both hats.

Schlesinger, Seaborg's proposed successor, is widely regarded as a whiz kid in the Nixon Administration. A graduate in economics from Harvard, where he later obtained a PhD, he has been a member of the faculty of the University of Virginia, and immediately before joining the Nixon Administration in 1969 he was engaged

on a study of nuclear proliferation at the Rand Corporation. His first and only job in the Administration was in the old Bureau of the Budget and later in the Office of Management and Budget, where his chief area of concern has been defence spending, but he has also been involved with funding for environmental protection. He was also said to have been considered by Nixon for the post of Under Secretary for the Interior, but that suggestion was opposed by Republicans from the Western States, and his name was never put forward for nomination.

Environmentalists will be able to take some heart from the fact that his hobby is bird-watching. But as head of the AEC he will face a difficult task in resolving the conflict between environmentalists who oppose the nuclear power programme and the strong advocates of nuclear energy in the Congress and the Administration. Nixon will be looking to Schlesinger to put into effect the commitment to have a liquid metal fast breeder reactor in operation by 1980—an important part of the message to Congress in June in which Nixon requested \$3,000 million for a crash programme for developing clean energy. The decision to concentrate on nuclear power production at the expense of other possible fuels has met with considerable opposition from environmentalist groups, who are urging a closer scrutiny of the environmental and public health hazards from reactors. Schlesinger's job at the AEC will evidently be to make sure that the nuclear power programme is not seriously disturbed by such fears, although he must obviously satisfy his critics that he is not deaf to their warnings.



James R. Schlesinger, Nixon's nominee as AEC chairman.

Uranium Enrichment

A FUNDAMENTAL change of policy for the sharing of information on uranium enrichment was announced last week by the US Atomic Energy Commission. The AEC is prepared to enter into discussions with the governments of ten other nations to explore possibilities for cooperating in multinational uranium enrichment facilities. The AEC is quick to point out, however, that these talks "would not involve a commitment at this time on the part of the US to make such technology available for use abroad". The talks are therefore simply concerned with exploring the financial and security arrangements under which the United States may be prepared to grant licences for the operation of gaseous diffusion plants in foreign countries. The nations to be represented at the talks are Britain, France, West Germany, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy, Australia, Canada and Japan.

The Joint Committee on Atomic Energy has long opposed any move towards the sharing of American gaseous diffusion technology with other nations, chiefly because it fears that the technological and economic lead that the United States now holds in this process may be lost, and some members clearly view the announcement with misgivings, for the committee has asked in no uncertain terms to be kept informed of developments. The commitment to enter exploratory talks is the fruit of a review of US policy on uranium enrichment conducted by the administration and announced by President Nixon in his foreign policy report to Congress on February 25.

The Atomic Energy Commission also points out that gas centrifuge technology will not form a part of the exploratory talks, so that the United States is not seeking to join Britain, West Germany and Holland in their multinational research effort on the gas centrifuge process (see page 360). An official at the AEC pointed out that the talks will be limited to gaseous diffusion because that process has already been proven, and it offers the best approach to meeting the demand for enriched uranium in the late 1970s.

This change in policy is bound to be welcomed by the nations involved, as it will expedite the use of uranium for peaceful purposes.