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Sputnik's Impact on Science Education in America

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The launch of Sputnik, the world's first artificial Earth orbiting satellite, by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957 was a triggering event. Before Sputnik pressure had been rising to mobilize America's intellectual resources to be more effective and useful in dealing with the Cold War. Sputnik released that pressure by stirring up a mixture of American hysteria, wounded self-esteem, fears of missile attacks, and deep questioning of the intellectual capabilities of popular democratic society and its educational system. After Sputnik the federal government took several remarkable actions: President Eisenhower established the position of Presidential Science Advisor; the House and the Senate reorganized their committee structures to focus on science policy; Congress created NASA – the National Aeronautics and Space Agency – and charged it to create a civilian space program; they tripled funding for the National Science Foundation to support basic research but also to improve science education and draw more young Americans into science and engineering; and they passed the National Defense Education Act which involved the federal government to an unprecedented extent with all levels of American education. I will describe some pre-Sputnik pressures to change American education, review some important effects of the subsequent changes, and talk about one major failure of change fostered by the national government.