

APR20-2020-020005

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the APR20 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

Science Policy Past and Present: Perspectives from AIP's FYI Bulletin

WILLIAM THOMAS, American Institute of Physics

Speaking as both a historian of science policy and as a journalist and analyst of current science policy events, the speaker will explore how historical knowledge can benefit policy discussion and how current deliberations can suggest subjects for historical inquiry. The presentation will emphasize that current deliberations respond to the peculiarities of present circumstances, making the application of history a non-trivial problem. Nevertheless, rigorous historical study yields highly useful information about trendlines and precedents that can substantially enrich the conceptual vocabulary of present-day discussions. Moreover, historical investigations can illuminate the substantial gulfs between past and present, bringing to attention often-tacit aspects of the incredibly intricate and expansive science policy landscape of the present that did not exist in the past. At the same time, historical study can root out clichés in science policy thought by emphasizing the treadmill-like aspects of certain perennial issues and sentiments, suggesting the need for more sharply defined approaches. Examples will be drawn from policy issues in Congress and at the White House and federal agencies.