December 27, 1971

Dr. Philip Handler
President
National Academy of Sciences
2101 Constitution Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20418

Dear Phil,

This is to respond to your Letter to Members of December 1971.

The importance of reorganizing the governance of NRC is self-evident and I am readily persuaded by the arguments for preserving a high degree of coordination among the science, medicine, and engineering branches. The ambiguities of the IOM will, I suspect, prove to be somewhat troublesome in the future, but probably not fatal. However, a few comments are in order.

1. I just do not understand a constitutional limitation of membership in an assembly to atmost ten years. If this is seriously intended I would probably take the initiative to defer my own membership until about 1985, on the assumption that, God willing, the decade thereafter might allow me more time to make an active contribution to the Academy's purposes; and it is unlikely that I would be any less wise. I understand the anti-gerontocratic motive for that limit, but I would urge more creative approaches. As one compromise I would suggest creating a category of "senior member" of an assembly. Such members would still be available for services but not for domineering roles like committee chairman etc. But the wisest course would be to avoid any such mechanical rules altogether and achieve the desired objective by actual policies in the selection of assembly men and committee men.

2. The new structure will make the NRC even more explicit as the operating arm of the NAS and will also make it effectively more distant from its membership. This is probably desirable since, as discussed in our previous conversations, it is rather difficult to achieve the responsible participation of every member in all of the action of the NRC. However, it seems to me all the more reason that a mechanism be carefully and explicitly set up to allow for the ventilation of controversial matters and to minimize the overbearing pre-emption that may now attach to a committee report in contrast to possible critical reactions. I would still favor the mechanism discussed in our conversations of facilitated access to committee reports and the active maintenance to an archives for critical responses.

over

In this general connection you may be interested that a request that I mailed a month ago to the Office of Publications requesting a few items has gone so far unheeded. This is not a very promising test run for a system which is intended to allow timely repartee. I could think of analogies involving Kissinger and foggy bottom, but will refrain.

3. There may be some merit in classifying committees, or perhaps rather the kinds of report that they put out, as being preeminently "technical" on the one hand, or "policy-advisory" on the other. This kind of labeling is intended to induce some appropriate self-consciousness about the extent to which an issue has an objectively verifiable solution (authentic discourse) or which must recruit scientific insight mainly for "informed judgment". The Academy should be cautious about but cannot avoid entering into policy advisory functions for it may have to give very careful attention to relevant constituencies, but may be otherwise confounded with a false appearance of objectivity in the selection of scientists.

Yours, with best wishes for yourself and for the Academy in 1972

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr

STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305 • (415) 321-1200

STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
*Department of Genetics*
*Professor Joshua Lederberg*

DEC 27 1971

P.S. Thank you, also, for your briefing letter (Dec 8) on the Intl. Inst. Appl. Syst. Anal. I share the idealism about the hopes for an IIASA, but have many questions about the realities of ongoing self-perpetuating interdisciplinary organizations. (The NRC's success is in direct measure to its co-option of temporary advisors from a disciplinary community.)

One tentative plan at CASBS-POSTS (see encl.) is a workshop on the problematics of interdisciplinary organization, perhaps to be held this June. Ken Arrow is also on our advisory board, so we will not lack for liaison; but any thoughts you may wish to pass back on the general concept of our workshop, or on specifics how it might be helpful vis a vis IIASA (which might be regarded as the logical culmination of interdisciplinistics) would of course be most welcome.

Yours,

LT. JOSEPH P. KENNEDY, JR. LABORATORIES FOR MOLECULAR MEDICINE
dedicated to the study of mental retardation

Molecular Biology Heredity Neurobiology Developmental Medicine