PART IV

The People's Science

Advisors—Can Outsiders Be Effective?

You've convinced me. Now go out and bring pressure on me.

—President Franklin Roosevelt

as quoted by Saul Alinsky

in the Prologue of

Rules for Radicals (1971)
INTRODUCTION

The executive branch of our government has not been giving citizens the technical information they need. Scientists must therefore make their expertise directly available to the public and Congress.

The idea that the public as well as government and industry should have scientific advisors is an old one—as is the idea that the public interest should have lawyers to defend it. It was not until the 1960s, however, that a renewed public understanding of the insensitivity of government and industrial bureaucracies led to a substantial commitment in the legal profession to public interest law. It appears that the scientific community may now have reached a similar point. The growing public awareness of the dangerous consequences of leaving the exploitation of technology under the effective control of special industrial and government interests has led to a readiness within the scientific community to undertake a serious commitment to what we have termed “public interest science.”

There is an important difference between the practice of public interest law and public interest science, however. In a legal dispute, once both parties have obtained lawyers they can hope to receive a fair and equal hearing in front of a trained judge who gives their arguments his undivided attention. In a public debate over an application of technology, on the other hand, tremendous inequalities exist. The contending sides must speak to a distracted public through news media to which administration officials have comparatively easy and routine access. Moreover, an executive-branch official speaks with the authority of his office, while an independent scientist is usually an unknown quantity to the public.

Thus, it is important to determine whether the public interest activities of independent scientists can in fact activate political and legal restraints on irresponsible executive-branch actions. In this section of the book we present six case studies of instances where “outsiders” have had at least partial success. In none of these cases did the public interest scientists succeed in effecting as great a change in the policies at issue as they had hoped. But in each case, public exposure of the issues led to remedial action which had been impossible to obtain by those working within the executive branch. At least as important is the fact that many of the controversies stimulated by such exposure helped initiate a political process which often had quite far-reaching impact on the approach of society and government to the technologies involved.