
Off the Beat

Endow NIH to create a national university

by Amitai Etzioni

Recently, the outgoing deputy director of the National Institutes of Health, John F. Sherman, charged that the Nixon Administration's management-minded executives at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the Office of Management and Budget were moving in "with an iron hand" to run the research programs at NIH. Sherman warned that the scientific excellence of NIH might well be destroyed by political decision-makers. The deputy director's comments touched off a public dispute. Charles C. Edwards, assistant secretary for health in HEW, asserted the need for some scrutiny of a Government agency funded at a level of over \$2 billion a year. A group of 514 research scientists at NIH came to the defense of their deputy director and took issue with the Administration's emphasis on "large scale, mission-oriented, research projects."

Such squabbles between researchers and administrators will continue to erupt as long as NIH remains a Government agency. The scientific integrity of the work conducted intramurally at NIH, and its freedom from political intervention, can be fully assured only if NIH is made financially independent from the Government. Like the U.S. Post Office, NIH should be cut off from the Federal bureaucracy and turned into a public corporation. Congress should award it, as a going away present, an endowment of roughly 15 times its present intramural budget, enough that the yearly *yield* on the endowment would allow the world-renowned institution to cover its annual operational budget. The extramural programs, to the extent that they deal with basic research, could be transferred to the National Science Foundation; while those dealing with applied research might be integrated into the appropriate service-rendering HEW agencies.

Once fully autonomous, NIH could raise funds for further development, like other nonprofit corporations, and sprout research in other areas than biology and medicine, its present main-

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stays. Once NIH is decontrolled, it could serve as the core of a first-rate national university in Washington, D.C. The new National University of America might draw on various Washington institutions, from the Academy of Medicine to the Smithsonian, by way of institutional merger or individual recruitment, to rapidly expand its scope and further elevate its intellectual stature.

The need for a national university located in the nation's capital has long been recognized. The legislative history of proposals for such a university goes back as far as the Constitutional Convention of 1787. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, as well as a number of other Presidents, requested Congress to set up a national university, and George Washington even willed some stocks to the Government for that purpose, though the company later went out of business and no funds were ever realized from the bequest.

Washington is one of the few major capitals of the modern nations that has no first rate academic institutions within its confines. (To imply that the existing Washington universities cannot serve as a magnet, drawing to the nation's capital, on a permanent basis, the best academic minds, is not a deliberate slur but a sad fact.) Hopefully, when Washington becomes the home not just of the political elite but also of the intellectual one, there will be more interaction between the national policy makers and leading thinkers and researchers of the nation, of the kind found in Paris, London, Jerusalem, Moscow and Tokyo.

Congress in the past has been extremely reluctant to endow institutions, preferring to keep them at its annual mercy. But with the recent instance of political executive pressure on NIH fresh in Congressmen's minds, and in view of the many friends NIH has on the Hill, Congress might now be willing to make an exception. (The land grant act to colleges is a precursor of sorts.) Yet, such an endowment, it might be said, would set a dangerous precedent. A precedent it will surely set, but is it one fraught with dangers? Quite a few other Federal institutions that carry out professional work might well be better off if severed from the executive branch in this manner. The Food and Drug Administration, for instance, would be less subject to political pressure if it were a public corporation, financed by an endowment and *small* users fees (so not to make it dependent on any one client or even all the clients' fees). The same holds for the Public Broadcasting Corporation.

As far as institutions of higher education are concerned, if Congress were, over the next decade, to endow one

university each year, defined as having national stature, in each of the major regions of the country (one in Washington, D.C. and one in each of the nine regions), this could go a long way toward securing the financial future of a string of strong private institutions across the nation, counteracting the trend toward their erosion and absorption into state systems.

The long-run successes of NIH, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison have shown that top notch scientific work can be conducted at government institutions. However, the experience of these same institutions also illustrates the periodic tensions that inevitably result when political and intellectual considerations conflict. When the universities seem too leftist or too "hip" to the legislature, out come the loyalty oaths, the "sack-the-red-professor" cries, and the budget cutters. □

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