

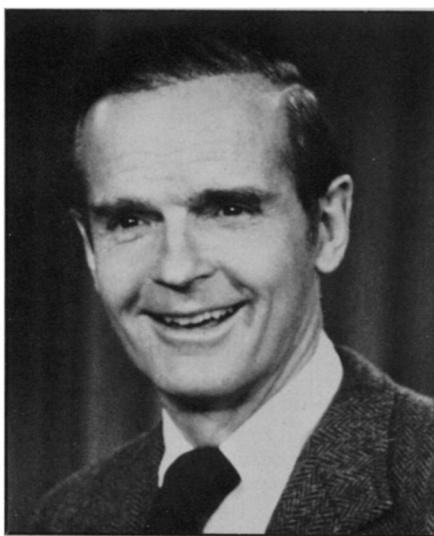
Proxmire vs NSF: Economizing or Baiting?

Like some uncomplicated parlor game brought from the attic to enliven a really slow day, scientist-baiting keeps popping up in Washington whenever times are tough and politicians need a simple way to show the folks back home their tax dollars are being well protected. The game's attractiveness rises from its simplicity: Most research requires doctoral-level competence to perform, so the scientific community is peculiarly subject to charges of elitism. Costs and benefits of exploring the unknown are inherently unpredictable, resulting in a protracted battle between scientists and accounting-minded policy makers. Most important, the subject matter of specific research projects is usually wrapped in impenetrable jargon or, if simplified, can sound totally irrelevant, taken out of context.

For the current season, the self-appointed champion of the taxpayers' dollar against the onslaughts of elitist and frivolous scientific endeavors is Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.), whose appropriations subcommittee last week held hearings on the National Science Foundation budget. Before the hearings began, Proxmire issued a press release charging NSF with supporting an "academic oligarchy" of favorite universities, which are over-represented on its advisory committees. The foundation, he charged, "has one of the worst Equal Employment Opportunity profiles for blacks and female professionals in the Federal Government." Then he went on to list five dubious-sounding NSF projects he said were "at best, of nominal value to the American taxpayer who foots the bill."

NSF Director H. Guyford Stever was first to rise to the challenge once the hearings began. To Proxmire's charge that almost half of NSF social science grants go to just eight universities and that university representation on the foundation's advisory committees bears a suspicious resemblance to the list of institutions given the most grants, Stever replied that indeed a problem of concentration does exist, but that neither the fault nor the cure can be laid on NSF. The quality of a school depends on the faculty and students that choose to go there, and when NSF recently awarded 1,044 fellowships that students could use at any university in the country, more than half chose to go to just three schools: MIT, Stanford and Harvard. Stever then reminded the Senator that when he too was young, Proxmire had chosen pres-

tigious schools to attend (Yale, B.A.; Harvard, M.B.A.). As for statistics on awards, Stever suggested that a better figure to discuss than simple concentration of grants to specific schools would be the "batting average" of grants awarded per number of applications submitted. Universities that receive the most grants are not necessarily "favored" by achieving unusual success in having grant applications accepted. Taking the University of Wisconsin



Proxmire: Indulging the yahoo streak?

as an example, Stever said it received the second greatest amount of Federal grants, yet ranked 23rd in its NSF "success ratio." Stever concluded that the geographic distribution of NSF grants is more even than the concentration of scientists.

Stever flatly denied that his organization had "one of the worst" records in hiring blacks and women; indeed, he said, it is "considerably better than the average of all [Government] agencies." For 1972, the last year for which full statistics are available, NSF had 51.7 percent women workers, compared with a 40.3 percent Government-wide average, and 24.5 percent minority employees, compared with 16 percent average.

Next came the five projects selected by Proxmire as examples of research having only "nominal value."

● "Hitchhiking—A Viable Addition to a Multimodal Transportation System." Stever explained that the purpose of the study was to see how state controlled hitchhiking could be made a safe, energy- and environment-saving alternative to one-passenger auto transportation. As a Student-Originated

Study project, it was selected for funding by a Congresswoman, Rep. Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.), and has had the full backing of the Colorado governor's office, which is eager to save gas on the Denver-Boulder Turnpike, where the experiment is being conducted.

● "Preliminary Investigation of Special Impact of Television on Blacks." NSF's assistant director for research applications, Alfred Eggers, told the committee this project was specifically requested and partially supported by the Federal Communications Commission in an effort to see how the media could "better serve the black community."

● "Social Behavior of Alaskan Brown Bears." Besides making a contribution to the general understanding of animal behavior, including human behavior, Edward Creutz, NSF's assistant director for research, said knowledge gained might help prevent some of the tourist deaths that occur in the National Parks each year due to bear attacks.

● "Comparative Histology of Primate Teeth." Creutz said the study of the effect of different feeding habits on teeth could have important implications in dentistry.

● "African Climate During the Last Ice Age." Creutz explained that certain African lakes offer a unique record of past climate that could be valuable in assessing important climatic changes now taking place.

Undaunted, Proxmire was back this week giving NSF his "award" for the "biggest waste of the taxpayer's money for the month of March" for a study on why people fall in love. The danger in such charges is that many hometown newspapers run them without rebuttal, but in this case the Milwaukee Journal checked with the scientist involved and reported that the research bore on the rising American divorce rate and that similar research was going on at the University of Wisconsin, which Proxmire didn't mention. Researcher Ellen Berscheid of the University of Minnesota told another reporter that Proxmire's criticism was "out of the Dark Ages."

The Wall Street Journal once blamed scientist-baiting on the "built-in yahoo streak in Congress," indicating it was a relatively harmless pastime so long as the practitioners were "discriminating and accurate." Some Washington observers see Proxmire's current attacks as a play for publicity, hardly meeting these criteria. □