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Letters

The morals of math

Your recent report of the American Mathematical Society vote regarding SDI and military funding of research ("Math society says no to SDI funding," SN: 4/2/88, p.213) highlights a recurring theme in discussions relating to ethics and morals. I submit that the real problem is not where the money is coming from but how the results will be used. Specifically, some members of the AMS would apparently attempt to divest themselves of social responsibility by not taking "tainted" money from the military.

I submit that *not* taking the money will not make you less responsible for the outcome of the project or the results of basic research. Instead, basic research will continue to discover theorems and phenomena that will have a use in defense applications, whether the funds come from the Department of Defense or the Carnegie Foundation. The real issue should be *policy*: specifically, how we go about our national defense. When elements of the Defense Department take action, you as a citizen are as responsible as the soldier in the field. It is important to note that the Defense Department cannot, on its own, decide when

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Cover: Scholars once thought the "Archaic Mark," the manuscript containing this illustration, was created in the 12th century. Now, with the help of chemists, art historians have determined that the manuscript is a forgery, since it contains traces of Prussian blue, a pigment invented in the 18th century. The art world is increasingly turning to science for help in understanding and preserving its masterpieces as well as exposing its fakes. (Photo: Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, The University of Chicago Library)



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or where to send troops. That direction comes only from the President or from Congress. The real challenge, then, is to ensure that both domestic and foreign policy reflect the morals and values you hold dear.

James S. Green
Middletown, R.I.

I write to correct an inaccurate impression that is likely to be inferred from the description by Ivars Peterson of the second resolution of the 1988 referendum of the American Mathematical Society. That resolution calls for "efforts towards increasing the fraction of non-military funding for mathematics research, as well as towards increasing total research support."

Throughout the many discussions of this resolution, its proponents emphasized that the resolution was not aimed at diminishing Department of Defense funding of mathematical research (by which, in fact, the research of a number of proponents is supported). Rather it was aimed at seeking funding for mathematical research from a broader segment of agencies that use mathematics.

Mr. Peterson has deviated from his usual high standard of accuracy by substituting for the text of the resolution language that may be mathematically equivalent, but unfortunately psychologically inequivalent.

G.D. Mostow
President, American Mathematical Society
New Haven, Conn.

The full text of the resolution states: "The AMS is concerned about the large proportion of military funding of mathematics research. There is a tendency to distribute this support through narrowly focused (mission oriented) programs and to circumvent peer review procedures. This situation may skew and ultimately injure mathematics in the United States. Therefore those representing AMS are requested to direct their efforts towards increasing the fraction of non-military funding for mathematics research as well as towards increasing total research support."

Writing that the resolution calls for "a greater effort to decrease the proportion of funding for mathematics research coming from the Department of Defense" does not appear to be inconsistent with the text and intent of the resolution.

— I. Peterson