

review and forecast—policy

In 1966, the agencies of the Federal Government combined their resources behind a program designed to support research-supporting universities and create additional centers of research excellence in the United States. In evaluating Federal expenditures for research, the House Appropriations Committee specifically endorsed that effort to make good institutions outstanding.

But in 1967 the House Committee on Government Operations lambasted the National Institutes of Health for making two pilot grants—\$1 million each to Cornell and the University of Virginia—as an orderly prelude to opening the competition to additional institutions.

In 1967 as well, Dr. Jerome B. Wiesner, who helped create the program as science adviser to President Kennedy, as provost of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology decried it because the creation of new centers of scientific excellence was being pursued at the expense of existing centers—notably MIT. The centers of excellence program, he explained later, was designed for fat years, not lean. It was never intended to involve a distribution of paucity; it was supposed to maintain levels of support to universities using it best, while encouraging, with surplus, additional universities to use support better.

In 1968, as Congress and the nonscientist managers of Federal programs and policies continue to invade the science policy vacuum that exists despite years of effort, that particular university research support program will become what short-sighted Congressmen and bureaucrats want it to be: a pork barrel from which can be dipped institutional grants to wanting, if not deserving institutions in much the way dams and river and harbor projects have traditionally been dipped.

United States science policy has always been what Presidential Science Adviser Dr. Donald F. Hornig calls pragmatic. Dr. Wiesner, his predecessor, called it a constant response to crisis. There has never been a policy beyond the decision to marshal as much scientific and technical sophistication behind national efforts that needed it as possible.

What is happening now is that national crises continue to exist: in Vietnam, in the nation's cities, on the nation's streets and in its schools and air and waterways. But unlike the military crises of a decade ago, these are not generally amenable to solution by the arsenal of science and technology created to handle earlier crises.

Nevertheless, while the policy makers behind Hornig continue to wrestle with problems such as the allocation of scientific resources, justifiable levels of support and insurance against undesirable side-effects of technological advance, their control is eroding as their ability to meet current crises diminishes.

At this juncture, scientists by and large would like to continue to be supported at levels they became accustomed to during the fat years—levels, and levels of growth, which Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary John W. Gardner has called unthinkable.

At the same time, Congressional proponents of imaginative programs, from expansion of the social sciences to exploiting the oceans to fattening the input to the pork barrel, would like to seize the nation's science like a lance and hurl it at the heart of any unsolved problem or need. They will support support of science if science supports their goals; they will refuse to maintain existing levels of support for a scientific arsenal designed to solve the problems of the last two decades; science for its own sake has no meaning in this context.

But, as Dr. Hornig has pointed out, science is no grab bag out of which a blindfolded partygoer can pluck the solution to his latest problem. Solutions come only when there are people trained to see problems, understand them, and solve them. And for the next decade's problems, this may be a whole new breed of people.

"Progress," Dr. Hornig said last month on accepting the American Chemical Society's Charles L. Parsons Award, "can only be made where there are good ideas on which to act." And in many fields regarded now as critical, it is the ideas, rather than the willingness to support them, that seem to be in short supply.

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