
Science Legislation

A National Science Foundation: Will It Be a Practical Reality or a Perpetual Controversy?

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WORKING SCIENTISTS have every reason to be extremely uneasy about the likely consequences of the confusing status of scientists' support of legislation in Congress. The testimony of about one hundred representative scientists has been heard in Washington, and a number of questionnaires have been circulated fairly widely. It is apparent that, with negligibly few exceptions, American scientists favor the aims and objects of both of the main bills in Congress, S. 1285 and S. 1720. In fact, the broad objectives of S. 1285, introduced by Senator Manguson, and of S. 1720, introduced by Senators Kilgore, Johnson, Pepper, Fulbright, and Saltonstall, are substantially identical. The major differences involved have been analyzed objectively and carefully by Senator Kilgore (*Science*, 1945, **102**, 630-638), and it is seen that they relate almost wholly to techniques of administration and to patent policy. The new bill, S. 1720, represents a significant compromise on many controversial issues.

It is unfortunate that American scientists have not asked themselves the crucial question about the whole matter: If Congress prefers one or the other of the two bills, is either of them so poorly constructed that it would be better to have no support of legislation by scientists than to have the less desirable of the two? This is really the pertinent question, because perfection is too much to hope for, and a reasonably satisfactory arrangement is all one has a right to demand. If American scientists could stop emphasizing the one or two controversial points and accept what it is clear most of them want, namely the objectives of both of the bills in question, it is reasonable to hope that one of them might be passed soon. If not, the Congress is likely to throw up the job as hopeless and let scientific research starve again for lack of support.

It would seem that there are no insuperable barriers to satisfactory operation in either of the two bills. Their differences regarding patent policy are not of great interest to most scientists in the universities, and it appears likely that the compromise

suggested in S. 1720 will largely eliminate criticism from industrial scientists. On the score of the other problem, namely, the method of administration, differences remain, but the advantages of each method are counterbalanced by disadvantages which make the net differences small.

Recently a group of scientists under the leadership of Professors Harlow Shapley and Harold C. Urey have said: "The signers of this statement have a profound conviction that a program of federal aid to research is vital to the national interest and that legislation acceptable if not wholly satisfactory to those who hold divergent points of view about particular questions of function and organization can be drafted. We stand ready to cooperate in the revision of the bills recently considered at the Senate hearings on pending national science legislation. Our purpose is to serve the national interest by securing the collaboration of the maximum number of qualified scientists in a united attack on the scientific problems confronting the nation."

We are in full accord with this view and go one step further, namely, to say that, as the bills now stand, their differences are so inconsequential to the scientific functions they could subserve that the decision as to their exact form should be left to the judgment of the Congress, because public policy questions rather than scientific ones are involved.

We urge our colleagues to express their opinions on the crucial question raised above to their representatives in both Houses of Congress. We have reason to believe that the acrimonious debate over the details of this legislation has led many Congressmen to doubt whether there is actually any form of legislation which would be acceptable to a large majority of scientists and to the Congress itself. If the controversy over the form of administration of public funds is continued, the public and the Congress may easily conclude that scientists are more concerned about the political differences between the two bills than about the scientific objectives which they have in common.