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Laboratory Equipment and Tariff Policy

The high-school or college science teacher who wishes to purchase new laboratory equipment faces a dilemma. If he tries to buy from an American manufacturer, he runs into the fact that scientific supply houses are turning an increasing portion of their facilities to supplying the larger industrial market. If he considers buying from abroad, he runs into the barrier of an import duty as high as 50 percent.

The United States imposes a higher import duty on scientific instruments and apparatus used for educational purposes than does any other Western country. New Zealand, the country with the next highest rate, charges 20 percent. Sweden charges 10 percent; the Netherlands, 3 percent; and in Canada and more than a dozen other countries, such equipment is admitted duty free.

The American Association of Physics Teachers has become concerned about the quality and availability of scientific apparatus, particularly for some of the newer experiments, and has appointed a committee headed by Sanborn C. Brown of Massachusetts Institute of Technology to see what can be done. One possibility is the reduction or elimination of the high import tariff. The AAPT committee has discussed this possibility, with encouraging results, with Senator Leverett Saltonstall. Senator Saltonstall has invited correspondence from educational groups concerned with the problem of securing satisfactory research and teaching equipment. The U.S. Commissioner of Customs has given the following opinion concerning the feasibility of eliminating the import tariff.

"In the Tariff Act of 1913 provision was made for the free entry of scientific apparatus when imported by certain societies and institutions for educational or scientific purposes. This provision of the law was omitted by Congress from the Tariff Act of 1922 and from the current law, Tariff Act of 1930. It is the opinion of the Bureau that no unusual administrative difficulties would be presented by legislation allowing the free entry of the merchandise in question for educational institutions."

A more recent precedent is found in the UNESCO-sponsored agreement to admit audio-visual aids for educational purposes without duty. The United States has signed but not yet ratified this agreement.

Dropping the tariff would not seriously affect the income of equipment manufacturers. As of 1953, only 11 percent of the nation's research and development expenditures was chargeable to educational institutions. The fraction that went for the purchase of equipment that might come either from domestic or foreign suppliers is unknown, but certainly it is small.

It appears that elimination or substantial reduction in current import duties would be a great boon to educational institutions and of small moment to American industry. If this expectation is wrong, there remains an escape clause in existing tariff law and regulations whereby any special concessions can be withdrawn if it can be shown that they cause or threaten serious injury to a domestic industry producing like or directly competitive products.

Since some excellent and inexpensive educational apparatus is again being produced abroad, the AAPT committee believes it desirable to facilitate importation and invites the support of other interested groups in bringing about the hoped-for change in tariff policy.—D.W.