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Wanted: Consistency

Current emphasis on science in the thinking of Congressmen and other public leaders illustrates both a good trend and a bad habit. To have greater attention given to the welfare of science is good, but to have attitudes change so quickly and radically is a part of the inconsistent, on-and-off support that interferes seriously with steady scientific progress. Although public education rather than scientific progress itself is involved, the history of support for the international exhibition to be held in Brussels next year illustrates the point. If the budget for American scientific exhibits were up for vote now, liberal support would be almost certain. In 1956, adequate support was planned and partly appropriated. Last spring, Congress cut the total appropriation by about 25 percent.

On the basis of the original budget allotted by the State Department to the National Science Foundation for science exhibits, U.S. planners promised the other participating nations a specific list of exhibits to be included in an integrated, international portrayal of the story of scientific progress, a story that will be presented in four sections—on the atom, the molecule, the crystal, and the living cell. When the cut came, all of it had to be taken from exhibit funds, for the cost of a building (not for science, but for other U.S. exhibits) could not be reduced, and neither could a number of other fixed charges, such as that of staffing the displays in Brussels. All phases of U.S. participation suffered, science included. Instead of an expected $600,000 for the actual construction of scientific exhibits, only $280,000 was available.

U.S. planners faced a hard choice: Should they cheapen exhibits or eliminate some? They did both. Some vivid operating exhibits were replaced by static panels or wall charts. Others were canceled entirely.

This is not to say that science in the U.S. will be poorly represented. Far from it. The exhibits have been planned with great care by a committee under the chairmanship of Paul Weiss, with Ernest Lawrence taking primary responsibility for the atom, Henry Eyring for the molecule, Cyril Smith and Frederick Seitz for the crystal, and Paul Weiss for the living cell. These men and their committees have made the exhibits just as good as the limited budget permits. American industry has chipped in with $600,000 worth of donated equipment and time. Scientists and scientific industry have produced exhibits that will be good, but not good enough when comparisons between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are inevitable and when the U.S.S.R. seems to have unlimited funds with which to advertise its scientific achievements.

There are still some salvage possibilities. For $25,000 the science exhibits could be supplemented with a two-hour program of top-quality science motion pictures. For $60,000 the wall charts could be replaced by the originally planned operating models. Even these small sums are not available. Unless a generous angel appears quickly, there can be no improvement over present plans.

As for Brussels, we are reduced to hoping that the great international jury of visitors will be impressed by a handsome building, and that they like wall charts. As for the U.S., we hope that there are beginning to be enough examples of the essentially uneconomical nature of short-term, on-and-off financing of science so that we can look forward to longer term and more consistent support. Both science and the country will profit from such a change.—D.W.