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## Slow Motion

Heartening evidence that Congress has come to a fuller realization of the importance of basic research was the passage last September of an act "to authorize the expenditure of funds through grants for support of scientific research, and other purposes." The effect of the act (Public Law 85-934) is to liberalize the terms by which some federal agencies, hitherto limited to entering into contracts for support of research, can provide grants for research. Several agencies—the National Science Foundation, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and the Department of Agriculture—already had such authorization and hence are not affected by the act. The principal agencies that are affected are the Department of Defense, the Atomic Energy Commission, the National Bureau of Standards, and the newly created National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

All of the government agencies concerned (except the space agency, which was not in existence at the time) favored passage of the act on the grounds that grants are especially appropriate for the support of basic research. Grants, unlike contracts, demand neither detailed plans nor detailed accounting: the funds are granted outright to nonprofit institutions, a procedure that recognizes the need for flexibility in carrying out experiments that may turn up unexpected results and one that may obviate, at least to a large extent, the necessity for dealing with the tricky problem of suitable overhead charges.

By giving the granting agencies the discretionary authority to vest title to equipment purchased under the grants to the research institutions, the act bypasses the cumbersome and often wasteful bookkeeping and disposal problems that are inherent in contracts [see *Science* 128, 59 (11 July 1958)].

The act is permissive, not mandatory. Nevertheless, the fact that it was supported by the scientific agencies led us to hope that its provisions would be eagerly put into effect. Events have only partially fulfilled these hopes. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration is fully utilizing the provisions of the act and has been doing so for several months. The National Bureau of Standards, which finds contracts suitable for most of its purposes, has not yet made grants, but stands ready to do so whenever it seems advantageous either to the grantee or to itself.

The Department of Defense, according to one of its spokesmen, is at work on a directive to authorize grants but is running into difficulties in preparing a document that will be compatible with the differing rules of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. When the directive will be ready is unknown.

The AEC is in a somewhat similar state. A committee has been set up to study the law, but no report has been prepared. The AEC has felt less need for the new authority than some other agencies because the provisions of its enabling act already permit it to make grants of equipment.

Thus the failure of the Defense Department and the AEC to move more rapidly to put the provisions of the act into effect is attributable in part to the complex legal and jurisdictional problems that these gigantic organizations have to cope with, in part to the fact that over a long period they have learned how to operate with the contract system and feel no sense of urgency about introducing a variant method, and perhaps in part to the fact that the granting system would give them less control over the projects they support.

Nevertheless, the new law offers an improved method for the support of basic research. We hope the Defense Department and the AEC will give it a full trial.—G.DuS.