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Footnote to History

In his farewell address to the nation on 17 January 1961 President Eisenhower had this to say about science and technology:

"Today, the solitary inventor, tinkering in his shop, has been overshadowed by task forces of scientists in laboratories and testing fields. In the same fashion, the free university, historically the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research. Partly because of the huge costs involved, a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity. For every old blackboard there are now hundreds of electronic computers.

"The prospect of domination of the nation's scholars by federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever present—and is gravely to be regarded.

"Yet, in holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite."

A good many scientists have shared this concern about the "equal and opposite danger" and would welcome further discussion. G. B. Kistiakowsky, President Eisenhower's Special Assistant for Science and Technology, writes in this connection:

"I would like to comment briefly about President Eisenhower's reference to science and technology in his farewell address. Several questions have been directed to me about it, and since Mr. Eisenhower talked to me at some length later that week, others may be interested to know more about his views than could be developed in a short talk.

"The major point, I believe, which he wanted to convey was his conviction that the part of science which is engaged in for armaments purposes must never be allowed to dominate all of science or curtail basic research. He was concerned to see so many pages of advertisements identifying 'science' with armaments, asserting to the people that research means just bigger and better missiles, etc., while very little is said about the true nature of basic research as a cultural endeavor and a source of advancing welfare to the people. And he was particularly anxious that educational institutions, whose task he sees as the support of free intellectual inquiry and the acquisition of new scientific knowledge, should not concentrate on large-scale military research and development contracts at the expense of their true scientific endeavors.

"In line with these ideas, I believe President Eisenhower was concerned that the emphasis on military research and development in our industry, press, and even institutions of higher learning could create a combination of special interests highly undesirable in our society. His reference in the speech to the scientific-technological elite I know was meant in this context.

"It is interesting to me to realize how similar the views of Mr. Eisenhower are in these matters to those I have heard many times from scientists all over the nation, and which I share. I think, in part, this reflects the great interest in and support for science President Eisenhower demonstrated during his term of office."—G.DuS.