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One in Eighteen Thousand

For many scientific purposes an event that happens only once in ten or twenty thousand tries is statistically insignificant; a probability of .0001 or .00005 may, in many cases, be safely disregarded. But in other cases, the focus of interest may be on the unusual event itself—say, a mutation of a gene or the appearance of a strange nuclear particle. The event, though very infrequent, may be of significant interest.

A roughly analogous situation occurs in the administration of human affairs, but the difference lies in the way the event is considered. If the event is unwanted, then steps may be taken to try to prevent its recurrence. The case of Edward L. Yellin is a rare event of this kind. Mr. Yellin, a graduate student in mechanical engineering at the University of Illinois, was given a National Science Fellowship for the academic year 1961–62. His academic record, although it was interrupted by 8 years of work in a steel mill, was excellent; his recommendations were high; and his application included a properly signed and sworn disclaimer of subversive affiliations. Last March, at the time the award was made, there was no reason for the National Science Foundation to suppose that the fellowship was undeserved.

Early in April the House Un-American Activities Committee informed the Foundation that in 1958 Mr. Yellin, who had allegedly been a member of the Communist Party, refused to answer any questions about his activities on the basis of the First Amendment. The Committee also charged that Mr. Yellin, in applying for work at the steel mill, had not indicated that he had had 2 years of college education. Mr. Yellin was cited for contempt of Congress and convicted in 1960. The conviction was upheld upon appeal to a Circuit Court and is now being appealed to the Supreme Court. As a consequence, Mr. Yellin was suspended for 10 days by the University of Illinois. After an unpublicized hearing, at which he is said to have answered all questions fully and frankly, he was reinstated. The clear implication of this action is that the examining committee at Illinois was convinced that Mr. Yellin was morally and intellectually qualified to continue as a student. But the Foundation was not informed of any of these actions or conclusions.

After hearings last week at which members of the Un-American Activities and the House Science and Astronautics committees questioned Foundation officials about the case, the Executive Committee of the National Science Board was convened and the fellowship was revoked on the ground that there was a possibility that the term would be interrupted. Opinion about the wisdom of this action is divided. According to one view, the fellowship might have been suspended to give time for a careful consideration of policy to govern this and future cases. The policy question is: Is conviction for a criminal offense adequate grounds for denying or revoking a fellowship? The law governing fellowships says that they shall be awarded "solely on the basis of ability." The Foundation interprets ability to include, in addition to intellectual capacity, motivation, independence, objective judgment, accuracy, and integrity. Mr. Yellin's record throws doubt upon his qualifications under this broad definition of ability.

The remedy suggested by this first case of its kind in the 18,000 fellowships that the Foundation has awarded is a simple one. To minimize the chance that so rare an event will occur again the Foundation need only include on its application form a question about the criminal record of the candidate. Cases could then be decided on their merits: some crimes are more relevant than others.—G.DuS.