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National Humanities Foundation

The world of learning is always kept off balance by the achievements of individual scholars, the special needs of time or place that direct resources and interest toward one field rather than another, or the special opportunities that arise as a result of some fortunate circumstance. Scholarship never moves forward uniformly over its entire frontier. Nor should it. Perfect balance—if we knew what that means—could be achieved only by letting the slowest set the pace. Yet always there is recognition that the imbalance should not become too great or last too long, and in recent years many scientists, whose fields have been prospering greatly, have recognized that special effort should be devoted to nurturing the humanities and arts. Four years ago the President's Science Advisory Committee wrote:

"We repudiate emphatically any notion that science research and scientific education are the only kinds of learning that matter in America. The responsibility of this Committee is limited to scientific matters, but obviously a high civilization must not limit its efforts to science alone. Even in the interests of science itself it is essential to give full value and support to the other great branches of man's artistic, literary, and scholarly activity."

In 1963 the Commission on the Humanities was created by the American Council of Learned Societies, the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa. The commission has now reported that it recommends a National Humanities Foundation patterned after the National Science Foundation and intended to do for the humanities and the arts what the NSF has done for the sciences: support research, offer fellowships, provide opportunities for the improvement of teaching, improve facilities, and, in general, give to scholars those types of aid that will best enable them to advance their fields of research and study.

It will not be easy to persuade Congress to establish a National Humanities Foundation. It took 5 years of effort to bring the National Science Foundation into being, and it does not appear that a National Humanities Foundation will be any easier to establish. Humanists themselves will in some cases have to become convinced; congressmen will have to be persuaded; support must be generated from a variety of sources. All of this is a considerable undertaking, and it is not certain that the final outcome will look much like the goal now envisioned. Some critics have doubts or oppose the plan. Others contend that, as a result of the NSF experience, it should be possible to devise a better pattern of organization and to plan a better program of activities.

However these disagreements are resolved, a lively discussion of alternative goals and plans will be helpful. Scientists can well take part in this discussion, for the recommendations of the Commission on the Humanities—and scientists helped to write those recommendations—are of concern to all scholars, including scientists. That greater support for the humanities and arts would be desirable is hard to question. That the nation can afford it is clear. It would aid the humanities to have scientists understand and support their needs, just as it aids science to have its needs appreciated and supported by scholars in other fields. And "even in the interests of science itself it is essential to give full value and support to the other great branches of man's artistic, literary, and scholarly activity."—DAEL WOLFLE