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National Science Policy

Federally supported research activities are being reexamined. The immediate cause is the budgetary squeeze brought on by the war in Vietnam. More fundamental is the fact that a 20-year honeymoon for science is drawing to a close. Although needs for support of basic research are increasing, expanded budgets will be obtained only after convincing justification has been provided. Indications of the present climate can be seen in the executive branch, the press, and Congress. In contrast to other years, President Johnson hardly mentioned science in his State of the Union speech. In an article in the December issue of *Discovery*, John Finney, influential Washington correspondent of the *New York Times*, was critical of science policy making. Two congressional committees have expressed their concern. In hearings held 7, 10, and 11 January, a subcommittee headed by Representative Henry S. Reuss asked: "Are we matching research and development programs with national goals?"

The most significant development affecting science is the content of the report of the Daddario subcommittee (*Science*, 14 January). This document is the result of a searching examination of the National Science Foundation. It is especially critical of the quality of national science policy making. It urges a new role for the National Science Board, and it suggests that NSF should become more interested in applied research.

Two years ago, the Daddario subcommittee sought answers to the following questions:

(1) What level of Federal support is needed to maintain for the United States a position of leadership through basic research in the advancement of science and technology and their economic, cultural, and military applications? (2) What judgment can be reached on the balance of support now being given by the Federal Government to various fields of scientific endeavor, and on adjustments that should be considered, either within existing levels of overall support or under conditions of increased or decreased overall support?

In one form or another these questions have been posed by Congress since 1950. Originally NSF was expected to provide the answers, but it managed to avoid the problem. Congress did not press the issue, for the funds devoted to science were relatively small, and the honeymoon was on. Apparently despairing of getting a response from NSF, President Kennedy in 1962 assigned the problem to the President's Science Advisory Committee, Office of Science and Technology. When this group was not sufficiently responsive, the Daddario subcommittee put the questions to the National Academy of Sciences (*Science*, 30 April and 14 May 1965). The Academy recommended a 15-percent annual increase for support of basic research and suggested use of NSF as a "balance wheel," but did not provide mechanisms for allocating funds among the various branches of science.

The new Daddario report implicitly is critical of this failure. How can NSF act as a balance wheel if no one knows what constitutes balance? Having failed to obtain what it considered satisfactory guidance from NAS, the Daddario subcommittee has now turned to another source. The NSF Board has been selected as the new fount of wisdom, or, perhaps more accurately, the holder of the buck. The report, however, calls for a diminished role of the Board in the management of NSF.

With its comments and its recommendations of drastic changes the report conveys congressional impatience with key elements of our scientific leadership. As the government agency charged with fostering basic research, NSF has a special responsibility to lead in formulating and illuminating science policy. It must also be a more skillful advocate of the benefits that support of basic research yields the nation.—PHILIP H. ABELSON