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Transforming the National Science Foundation

A bill now before Congress (H.R. 13696) proposes several changes in the nature and organization of the National Science Foundation. If these changes are adopted, the social sciences will be explicitly included; international responsibilities will be increased; and responsibility for supporting research will be extended to include applied research in areas related to national goals. There will also be organizational changes. The status of the Director will be enhanced, and he will be given a substantial part of the authority and responsibility that hitherto have been assigned to the National Science Board. The National Science Board, relieved of managerial responsibility, is expected to become a more important policy-forming body, with special responsibility for national policy concerning science resources. And it will be expected to publish an annual report on the status and health of science and its disciplines, giving an indication of the aspects of science which may have implications for the needs of American society.

Congressman Daddario, author of H.R. 13696, said in *Science* (1 Apr., p. 42) that these changes are necessary because the Foundation has not kept pace with social demands, and that they are intended to give the Foundation a more positive and dynamic stance in government-science affairs. They are not, however, intended to diminish the support of general-purpose basic research or to detract from the Foundation's primary role of supporting science without regard to specific applications.

Testimony presented at recent hearings was generally favorable to the proposals, but endorsement of the idea of having the Foundation move into applied areas was sometimes reluctant. William Carey said that the Bureau of the Budget considered the judgment a close one but did not object, and he then added the hope that the Foundation would use the new authority "in a selective way and not at the expense of its primary function of supporting basic research." Frederick Seitz, president of the National Academy of Sciences, warned that the danger is far from remote that we would "pay a heavy price by sacrificing positions of leadership in important fields of science."

If the changes are adopted, it seems likely that the Foundation will receive larger appropriations, that it will assume a more influential role in determining the course of science, and that it will become more clearly a part of the centralized machinery of government directed toward the achievement of national goals. It will not become as mission-oriented as are the Atomic Energy Commission and the Department of Defense. Yet it will move closer to that status. In addition to evaluating projects submitted to it, it will actively select areas of research to be emphasized. Decisions as to what to support and how to use the Foundation's resources will become more centralized, more the responsibility of the Director and his staff, and he, in turn, will become more clearly accountable to the Congress and the President for the achievements of the Foundation.

These changes will give the Foundation enlarged opportunities to be useful. But the larger opportunities must be paid for. Political vulnerability will increase. Pressures will increase, and may come from more points of the compass. There will be risk that short-term objectives will take precedence over long-term goals. If the changes are made, as they probably will be, the National Science Board and the Director will be responsible for protecting the Foundation against paying too high a price for its new opportunities.—DAEL WOLFLE