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Discretionary Funds

Congress is now approving budgets it received in January. These budgets started to take shape well over a year ago, were intended to go into effect on 1 July, and will run through June of 1968, with some of the funds being expended after June 1968. This time lapse is typical. Each year unanticipated opportunities and new requirements inevitably call for changes in the adopted budgets, and every successful federal administrator learns how to reprogram funds to match new demands. Sometimes it is necessary to secure approval of the Bureau of the Budget or the cognizant congressional committee. Sometimes activities can be reclassified to fit budget categories. Usually what is desirable can be achieved, but delay, extra work, and red tape are inescapable. The problem would be eased if a small fraction of an agency's budget were available to the director to be used as he thought necessary to accomplish the objectives of the agency.

The principle of a discretionary or contingency fund is well established in private foundations. One of the clearest lessons of Project Hindsight (*Science*, 30 July 1965) was evidence of the need of industrial and government laboratories for flexible funds enabling them to take advantage of a new idea or a promising but unexpected research lead. This year the House of Representatives' Committee on Appropriations, while recommending a reduction of \$171 million in the Department of Defense funds for research, development, test, and evaluation, approved the Department's use of its emergency fund for these purposes and left intact the full requested amount of \$125 million.

The need for fiscal flexibility in universities was the central theme of a declaration of policy entitled *The Efficiency of Freedom* that was prepared by a committee of businessmen, university presidents, and community and labor leaders under the chairmanship of Milton S. Eisenhower. The gist of the argument is contained in a quotation from Arthur Naftalin, then commissioner of administration for the State of Minnesota and now mayor of Minneapolis. The decision as to how much of a state's resources should be allocated to higher education, Naftalin wrote, lies "wholly, appropriately and inescapably within the jurisdiction of the governor and the state legislature." But after the amount is determined, the institution itself must have the "responsibility to determine how the limited resources available shall be distributed among the infinite number of competing academic needs."

Congress cannot abandon close surveillance over agency budgets. Yet federal agencies responsible for major research and educational activities need some of the same fiscal flexibility that is necessary for universities, the Department of Defense, and research laboratories. Congressional and Bureau of the Budget review and control would not be lost if government agencies were given some discretionary funds that remained available until spent, that the director could use for worthwhile but unanticipated activities that lie within the agency's area of responsibility, and for which he would later render account.

If a man is deemed qualified to carry the heavy responsibilities of a budget the size of those of NASA, HEW, AEC, NIH, or NSF, surely he is qualified to have disposition of a small portion of the budget entrusted entirely to his judgment. It is a good bet that a discretionary fund of this kind would be at least as prudently handled as any other portion of an agency's entire budget.—DAEL WOLFLE