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Social Science Research on Foreign Areas

When the Camelot affair exploded in 1965, President Johnson asked the Department of State to begin screening government-sponsored social science research on foreign areas in order to assure the propriety of the studies and to guard against adverse effects on U.S. foreign relations. Under the procedures it established for this purpose, the Department of State has not tried to assess the merit or method of proposed studies, but only to avoid risk of damage to our foreign relations. Thus, projects supported by such agencies as NIH, NSF, or the Department of Agriculture have been exempted or cleared quickly. More searching scrutiny has been given to projects likely to be subject to political interpretation or misinterpretation: for example, those sponsored by the Department of Defense and other agencies with political and overseas responsibilities, projects manifestly related to foreign relations, and those involving extensive contact with foreign nationals.

Since 1965, the Department has reviewed 377 projects from 20 agencies. Half were cleared; 44 percent were cleared subject to classification of the results or to other conditions; and 6 percent were denied clearance or were withdrawn by the sponsoring agency. Another 525 decisions concerned an investigator's travel plans, clearance of a report, or other follow-up actions.*

Discussions with representatives of the agencies that must submit projects for clearance and with some of their social science advisers have turned up (i) a few criticisms over delays in securing approval, (ii) the generalization that the easiest way to get a project approved is to promise to classify the results, but (iii) no strong protests over the way in which the Department of State has carried out its project-screening responsibilities.

However, the State Department review follows at least one, and often several, reviews within the sponsoring agency in terms of its own criteria, which often include sensitivity to foreign relations problems. Multiple reviews, the wish of agency heads to avoid clashes with the Department of State, and criticisms by some members of Congress concerning the usefulness of social science research in general and foreign area research in particular constitute a series of dampers that are reported to have reduced the amount of research and to have shifted some agency programs into safer directions. It seems easier to play it safe than to run the risk of difficulties and criticism.

Most of the research in question has been intended to help an agency determine its policies and carry out its missions. A smaller part can be classed as basic research on social processes. Playing it safe has never been the best formula for achieving imaginative and productive research results, and in this case is depriving the agencies of information of value in planning and conducting their major activities.

The whole situation calls for something quite the opposite from an additional damper. Within recent months, a Defense Science Board study group and the National Research Council's Advisory Committee on Government Programs in the Behavioral Sciences have both advocated an interagency group to plan, coordinate, and actively support foreign area research for government agencies. An agency for this purpose is needed to counteract some of the existing dampers. It could be brought into being quickly if the Department of State and the Office of Science and Technology agree.—DAEL WOLFLE

* Department of State Foreign Affairs Research Council, "A Report on the First Three Years" (August 1968), 19 pages, multilithed.