

# Letters

## Research without Boondoggles

The editorial of Victor Weisskopf (13 Feb., p. 935) commenting on the threatened position of basic science is representative of much of the feeling in the scientific community. Basic research must defend itself against the current lower level of funding and increasing public concern. Commonly the short-sighted legislators or socially concerned youth who "don't understand the situation" are singled out as the bleak future of American science is echoed. Seldom, however, do the staunch defenders of more support for pure science examine the state of what it is that they are defending. It is usually assumed that the basic research is of good quality and that the scientists are reasonably competent. This is, of course, what we need more of. Unfortunately, however, the thought is seldom entertained publicly that some of the "research" that is being supported might be routine and unimaginative, if not incompetent. How much of the research dollar has been, and is being, spent on the solution of "problems" that are not really problems, or on those that have been published before by earlier workers? How many funded proposals result in "data looking for a problem" or in expensive and often redundant equipment purchased solely because the money was available at the end of the grant tenure or the fiscal year? How much has been wasted on feasibility studies, pilot programs, and other boondoggles hiding behind the respectability of fundamental basic science? Almost every scientist knows what goes on but few are willing to admit it, publicly.

Can a reduced level of material support to basic science, if intelligently and critically channeled toward weeding out such "research," produce more good science, attract and keep more good young scientists and lower the level of public concern and legislative skepticism? On the other hand would increased funding serve to further the level of mediocrity begun in the affluent

past and produce further public disinterest? What appears needed is more good basic research, not just more basic research. A more critical evaluation of priorities together with better evaluated research proposals cannot help but improve the signal-to-noise ratio. Academic freedom and the pursuit of the intrinsically interesting need not necessarily be compromised.

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## Campus Turmoil and Problems

Leon Eisenberg made some cogent observations in "Student unrest: Sources and consequences" (27 Mar., p. 1688). I am qualified to comment only in the sense of being a member and observer of this generation and one whose social adolescence continues to be prolonged by postgraduate and postdoctoral studies.

1) Having been denied access to dignified social roles, both ghetto blacks and white students have created counter cultures with value structures which give them a sense of significance. They are united in opposition to the existing order. These two countercultures borrow extensively from each other in terms of life style and ideology, and many of the most militant have feet in both camps.

2) Countercultures have inherent liabilities. The (ghetto) black and the youth cultures can exist only in opposition to the status quo. Neither could run our technical world without major changes in their value systems, which currently denigrate technology and reason. Another danger is that they will drift so far from the mainstream of society as to make return impossible. Counter-countercultures can emerge, such as the British skinheads, directly opposed to the counterculture. Finally, adherents to countercultures are particularly susceptible to peer group pressure. Having turned their backs on

society at large they must win acceptance by their chosen companions.

3) The mass media play a critical role in counterculture formation. First, they make large numbers of the disillusioned aware of their mutual existence—scattered individuals don't make a movement. Second, the media direct the counterculture's development by selective reporting. For instance, the media helped kill the urban hippie movement by overexposure.

Yet the situation is in no way hopeless. The young, and to a lesser extent the black, are crying out for a chance to rejoin society. Students call again and again for relevance. The outpouring of energies on behalf of Eugene McCarthy indicates the willingness of the young to work within the system if given meaningful roles. There is a growing feeling among university students that society has no real use for their expensive talents and encourages education merely to keep the young out of circulation. . . . Any number of national needs could appeal to the young and the black: rebuilding of the central cities by residents, reclamation of the environment at home and abroad, reparations in Southeast Asia, and so forth. The scientific community can play a part by helping to create socially valuable and ego-fulfilling roles for the young. But the political system must act soon; society should heed the calls for black pride and student power.

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Luther J. Carter's article regarding the University of Michigan's response to black student demands (10 Apr., p. 229) includes a report of a full-page advertisement which appeared on 22 March, in the midst of the class boycott, in which 500 faculty members endorsed four principles condemning the violence and disruption on the Michigan campus. As Carter correctly points out, this advertisement was initiated and prepared prior to and independently of the Black Action Movement's actions; however, the unfortunate timing of its publication did much to exacerbate an already volatile situation.

Lest the public be left with the erroneous impression that the U. of M. faculty was unanimous in endorsing this four-point program for law and order, it should be noted that a reply to the original statement was published on 2 April (after negotiations had been