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The Status of Intellectuals

The status of physicians and scientists in today's world is ambiguous. They share with other scholars, whom I shall collectively call "intellectuals," public suspicion of their motives, their usefulness, and their effect upon society. How do intellectuals fit into society? Into politics? What are the boundaries of their power in universities, and what are their rights and responsibilities in the public arena?

It is especially important to define how intellectuals fare in federal government, since it can no longer operate without their services. Involvement in government has taken varied forms, ranging from the highly exposed, as exemplified by John Gardner, to the cloaked Rand Corporation. When faced with particular problems, government has sought outside organizations of intellectuals, as when the Food and Drug Administration was charged by Congress with evaluating the efficiency and safety of drugs. Fortunately, the Food and Drug Administration turned to the National Academy of Sciences. This poses the question of whether government should mainly develop its own intellectual capabilities or seek such service outside. I favor the latter.

The problem, then, of how intellectuals fare in government has no simple answer. As a group they have no strong voice such as cabinet representation or political strength to influence important legislation concerning education, research, and medical practice.

Many intellectuals no longer willingly accept a passive role in government. But they eschew the aggressive patterns set by most labor union leaders, businessmen, and politicians, whose main goals often are political fame and power. With such different objectives and methods, how can they integrate into government? Should professionals be reorganized along conventional political lines, as is being suggested by the Federation of American Scientists? I fear the academic world would not accept this organization. But if intellectuals wish to maintain freedom and remain almost wholly disorganized, they must be prepared to accept the consequences.

The problem is so complex that I can only list a few suggestions on a very practical level to act as a nidus for penetrating thought and, even more important, for imagination.

1) Many problems of importance to intellectuals should be studied by such organizations as the National Institutes of Health, the Institute of Medicine, the National Academy of Sciences, the Association of American Medical Colleges, the American Medical Association, and the American Hospital Association.

2) Universities, clinics, group practices, and local medical societies should broaden their intellectual base.

3) The town-gown cleavage should be abolished, and the biomedical sciences and medicine should rejoin the universities to prevent even greater fragmentation of the intellectual's world.

4) Much stronger understanding than we now have should be forged between intellectuals and the world of business.

5) Intellectuals must avoid attitudes of superiority and snobbery as a cloak for inferiority while taking their rightful place in society. Anti-intellectualism should be combated not by confrontation, shows of violence, petulance, or unionization, but by counterposing organizations and strong individuals responsive to the needs of both intellectuals and the people.

6) The public and government must learn that intellectuals have an indispensable role in the affairs of man, nor should it be forgotten by intellectuals that this applies both ways.—IRVINE H. PAGE, *Editor*, *Modern Medicine*.

This editorial is adapted from I. H. Page, "The status of intellectuals and why," *Modern Medicine* (7 August 1972), pp. 41-43.