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The Shaming of Science

What shall we make of the congressional furor over biological and social science research? According to Miles' law, where you stand depends on where you sit. If one is a social scientist, one sees Congress at its worst, meddling in matters it doesn't comprehend while Rome burns. If one is less involved, one may put it down to a tiresome political overreaction to far-out research projects. The serious question is whether we are seeing the beginning of something much deeper: a loss of nerve where science and technology are concerned.

It is unlikely that anybody knows the answer. But the scientific community ought not to merely sit back and take a bad rap. If open season is being declared on long-accepted processes for determining scientific merit and social value in the funding of research, a very great deal is at stake. Summary judgments may spread to science as a whole because of dissatisfaction with a few fields.

For three decades, politics and science in this country have struggled to come to terms. Neither can do without the other, and neither can afford to undermine confidence in the other.

Both government and science can absorb criticism. Government has reaped a bumper harvest of it. Science and technology have been called to account for going too far or falling too short. So be it. Criticism reinforces accountability in a society based on rights and responsibilities.

Science and politics have enough trouble finding common ground without removing the quality of respect from the relationship. While only a small part of the research enterprise has been called into question, the continued parading of research projects in the streets to a drumfire of ridicule and intimidation can very quickly bring an end to respect and replace it with a quarrel. That is a high price for a nation which came to believe in science as a discovery process and an edge of light in a troubled world.

Congressional oversight of science is not at issue. But ambushing one research project after another is not what we expect of oversight. One cannot believe that Congress is about to fit social science research for a straitjacket; it will not come to that. But a smog of uncertainty hangs over the administration of research. The danger is that first-rate biological and social science research will carry unacceptable risks for good investigators, and that funds will be spent only where they can be spent safely, well out of the range of political guns. There is no satisfaction in that sort of cease-fire.

The shaming of science has gone far enough. There is plenty of work for legislative oversight. Neither the Executive Branch nor Congress has established an enduring policy relative to long-term investment in basic science. The equities in the peer review system are fair game for legislative scrutiny. Examination of the question of trading off incentives for private sector innovation against direct funding of R & D is overdue. The decline in research and development investment in the United States, relative to that of competing nations merits more than hand-wringing.

We should keep some sense of perspective. Over the years, Congress has done much to advance the sciences and to be an action-forcing influence on a reluctant Executive Branch. At its best, legislative oversight earns high marks.

It comes down to a matter of asking the right questions instead of the wrong ones about science and public policy. If the rules of political oversight are reasonable, science and government can reinforce each other. But if oversight is employed only to discredit scientific motive and responsibility, it will be a cold winter.—WILLIAM D. CAREY