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Budget Priorities: Science a Big Loser?

This is the season for falling leaves, quick frosts, and budget making. In the bastions of the Old Executive Office Building close by the White House, the lights burn late as President Ford's next budget is painfully assembled. Secrecy reigns, as it always has.

But for budget watchers there are ominous clues to what may happen. Policy-makers in the Administration, confronted by spectacular deficits and promised tax reduction, are striving desperately to stem the rise in spending. In ranking priorities when shares of the budget must be rationed, federal agencies tend to see science as "soft" and discretionary—a view too often echoed in the White House and the Executive Office. Thus, as the Office of Management and Budget passes sentence on the agencies' requests, funds for scientific research now stand in jeopardy. The early signs say, in fact, that science is in a good deal of trouble. Basic research, for which federal support has already declined by nearly 20 percent since 1967, is in the most trouble, and matters have been made worse by the punishment meted out to the National Science Foundation's current research budget by Congress.

If scientists have difficulty understanding politics, it is little wonder. A few weeks ago, at the presentation of the National Medals of Science in the East Room, this year's Honors List heard glowing tributes to science. And a few weeks hence there will be a bill-signing ceremony heralding the triumphant return of a Science Adviser to the White House. The budgetary earthquake will soon follow. Medals and advisers may prettify science, but they do not compensate for weakened research capacity and crippled potential.

At this early stage in decision-making on the new budget, not everything is clear. However, indications are that research which is not mission-related—that is, directly and closely germane to agency assignments—will suffer. University-based research is likely to be squeezed out in favor of work in government research and development centers. All this may be meant to be a strategy for maximizing research efficiency and payoff on the budget dollar. It may also be seen as a way to inject more conservatism into the selection of research projects. If this is how the script is being written, its emphasis is on management criteria at the expense of scientific choice. For much of this, science can thank the political critics who have spent so much time ambushing and ridiculing research projects with titles that are easy to burlesque.

Science cannot expect to be exempted from all the consequences of the government's fiscal crises. But neither is it right for government to walk away from its commitment to science, much less be taken in by its detractors.

If the impact on science of the Administration's budget strategy is to be lightened, time becomes a factor. It will be too late when the final decisions are locked into the Budget Message. By then, the lines will have been drawn between the Administration and the Congress. Now is the time to forestall a major mistake after which it could take a decade for a depleted research enterprise to recover and rebuild.

Cutting back federal expenditures by \$28 billion, which is Mr. Ford's objective, may indeed make it possible to reduce taxes by the same amount. But with 75 percent of government's expenditures already "relatively uncontrollable," it will take a meat-ax to do it. Scientific research is an inviting target. Unless it is defended promptly and effectively, the United States as a learning society faces a stricken future.—WILLIAM D. CAREY, *Executive Officer, AAAS, 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036*