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Above all, *Gifted Children Newsletter* is a publication sensitive to the needs of the gifted and talented children of today. And it is the only publication comprehensive enough to give you the support you truly need to meet the many challenges of raising a gifted child. If you think your child is gifted, you owe it to yourself—and to your child—to use the coupon below to order your Free copy of *Gifted Children Newsletter* today.

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LETTERS

The Federal Government's Role in Basic Research

Recent and widely publicized remarks by economist and Nobel laureate Milton Friedman must *not* be taken as the last word on the need for government support of certain types of scientific research.

If the nation's leaders had paid more attention to Friedman's economic views, we would not have gotten ourselves into the fix we are in today; however, if we follow his scientific advice we will find ourselves in even deeper trouble.

First, let me point out where Friedman's reported analysis (*News and Comment*, 3 Oct. 1980, p. 33) is correct: Excessive federal support of basic research relative to private support can and does inhibit academic freedom. For several decades, major and necessary federally funded defense, space, and physics research programs and major and unnecessary federal tax and regulatory policies have drastically reduced the proportion of private research funds relative to federal funds. Thus, the direction of such research has been channeled and prostituted in many instances.

This serious problem of the imbalance between federal and private research funding must be recognized and corrected. Otherwise, the freedom to pursue potentially fruitful lines of inquiry out of curiosity rather than because of politics or bureaucratic cost-benefit ratios will disappear.

On the other hand, Friedman's solution to this imbalance would be catastrophic to the future of the country, its economy, and freedom itself. To advocate the abolishment of the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and federal support of higher education is like treating brain tumors with a guillotine.

The present difficulty with the government's role in basic research is that we have confused what the government's proper role should be. First of all, government should encourage private investment in basic and applied research through tax and regulatory reform.

Second, government should develop appropriate research partnerships with industry and academia such as those existing in agriculture and aeronautics.

Third, government should provide tailored encouragement and support for the private development and demonstration of new technologies where national needs demand more rapid development than current economic forces will allow.

Finally, government must fund those costly research and development programs, such as in nuclear fusion, space, defense, and global environment, which are obviously necessary but far beyond the risk-taking potential of the private sector under any foreseeable economic and regulatory conditions.

I probably would agree with Friedman if he advocated limiting the NSF to its former role of assisting basic scientific research and education and getting it out of applied research better done by others. I also probably would agree that the NIH should focus more on basic research that may lead to the prevention of disease rather than just ever more expensive means of treatment of disease.

In such change of emphasis, and in tax and regulatory reform to encourage more private-sector research, I could join in enthusiastic support.

Finally, I would hope that upon reflection, Friedman would admit that it is perfectly ethical to try to convince one's government or other funding source that scientific research which may benefit mankind should be funded by tax revenues, profits, or contributions, whichever appears most appropriate in a particular case.

Consider where we would be today if scientists had held back on such pseudo-ethical grounds in the areas of agriculture, energy, polio, DNA, air travel, communications, space, high-technology products, and our national defense, to name only a very few examples.

Our lives would be less rewarding than now, and freedom would have been lost.

HARRISON SCHMITT

U.S. Senate,
Washington, D.C. 20510

Teletext Systems

William J. Broad's article on teletext standards (*News and Comment*, 7 Nov. 1980, p. 611) attributes to one of us, H.M.S., the conclusion that the enthusiasm of some networks for closed captioning was probably motivated by a desire to "waste" potential communications capacity. In quite a different context, where we were emphasizing the need for systematic policies to ensure freedom and diversity in teletext services, we commented on possible motives. We did not then, nor did we ever, speculate that anyone's support for a closed captioning system grew out of anticompetitive motives. We merely speculated that a possible motive for the technical standards choice was to limit