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The American Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in 1848 and incorporated in 1874. Its objects are to further the work of scientists, to facilitate cooperation among them, to improve the effectiveness of science in the promotion of human welfare, and to increase public understanding and appreciation of the importance and promise of the methods of science in human progress.

Congress and Research

In almost any enterprise the agency furnishing monetary support has or can seize a predominant role in decisions affecting the way in which the money is spent. In applied research such control usually is desirable and even necessary. In fundamental research it is often well to give the investigator wide latitude to determine his own course. The wisdom of this policy has been widely recognized. The government granting agencies have been particularly enlightened in their administration of research grants and have not unduly interfered with the conduct of basic research. Science has enjoyed bounteous support from government with a minimum of onerous controls or influence.

My guess is that the honeymoon is about to end and that there could be trouble ahead. I see signs that federal policies are changing and that various interferences with the optimum development of science are likely to stem from Washington. The scientific establishment may be in the process of coming under the closer control of Congress.

One reason for concern is that to an increasing degree our academic institutions have become dependent on government grants and contracts. This one source now furnishes a greatly preponderant fraction of the money for research. Before the advent of large-scale federal support, funds were limited, but they came from many sources. Only limited harm could result if an individual grantor pursued restrictive policies. In the early days of federal grants, the agencies, in effect, were in competition with other sources of money. If government policies were onerous, investigators felt little pressure to comply: they simply obtained their funds elsewhere. Thus the wisdom and restraint shown by the agencies were reinforced by the bargaining position of the scientists. This healthy situation has changed as government has become the major source of university research funds and as the bargaining position of academic scientists has weakened. Almost inevitably the relation of the research worker to his donor is destined to be altered.

This already has begun to occur. For years the National Institutes of Health pursued increasingly liberal policies. The good scientists were supported. There was almost no bureaucratic interference. Paper work was held to a minimum. As a result we are in the midst of tremendous fundamental progress in biology and medicine, and the nation is gaining and will ultimately gain even more in better medical practice. Congressional pressure has now forced a change in NIH policies. It has been alleged that the agency is not exercising sufficient control over the expenditure of government funds. In consequence, NIH grantees are subjected to the irritating, time-consuming petty annoyance of increased paper work. This paper work will be done. Scientists receiving government support will continue to seek it even on the less attractive basis. There is in practice little alternative. Would NIH procedures have been changed in quite the same manner if the academic bargaining position were not so weak? This development is not so important in itself. It is significant because it is a sample of what could happen. Congress at this moment has the power through control of funds to alter or to channel activities of the academic scientific establishment. Further evidence that Congress has this power may soon be forthcoming—P.H.A.