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Federal Support of Basic Research

The report of the Committee on Science and Public Policy of the National Academy of Sciences is an important document prepared by a distinguished group. The committee (COSPUP) obviously worked hard, and the result is highly readable. The essence of the report is contained in the conclusions, which were printed in last week's issue of *Science*.

In view of the quality of COSPUP's membership it is not surprising that portions of the report are so excellent. On the other hand, it is not remarkable that the report leaves something to be desired, for there was much to be covered. At its worst, the 98-page document reminds one of the camel, "a horse designed by a committee." One suspects that the group never made up its mind toward whom the report was aimed. The first eight pages, which present the conclusions, seem designed primarily for scientists. A second chapter of six pages, entitled "Introduction," seems to be intended to educate congressmen concerning basic research and the importance of supporting it. Then follow five chapters on the history of government support of science, starting with the early days of the republic. This history is fairly detailed up to 1957 and occupies 41 pages. These chapters are scholarly, well written, and of special interest to historians and other students of government, but their relevance to the remainder of the report is slight. There follow 14 pages of statistics on the distribution of research and development funds which serve little purpose. The last 23 pages are of particular interest to scientists and include an excellent discussion of the project system and of the role of universities in the operation of the system. It is this part which provides most of the conclusions of the document.

In view of the length of the report there are some curious omissions. Perhaps the most glaring occurs in the historical part, which barely mentions crucial events of the period from 1957 to the present. There is only a veiled allusion to the activities of the Fountain Committee. Yet this committee forced the National Institutes of Health to change some of its policies on grants. These changes in turn caused the American Society of Biological Chemists, in April 1963, to request the National Academy of Sciences "to enunciate the principles and philosophy which could serve as a basic policy in the future conduct and administration of federal programs in support of fundamental research." This request led to the COSPUP study.

Other significant recent indications of changes in the attitude of Congress toward basic research are also missing. For instance, creation of the Elliott Committee is not mentioned. Thus, the historical treatment fails to provide an adequate sense of urgency for implementation of the report.

Actions of Congress indicate that we are entering an era in which support for science will no longer increase as fast as it has in the recent past. Accordingly, the committee might well have dealt with the major topic of responsible scientific choice. A matter which it treated only partially is the geographical distribution of funds. The strong institutions are more likely to preserve excellence as the basic criterion on which grants are made if they will try to see to it that the less favored institutions also receive help.

The report of the Committee on Science and Public Policy is an important and welcome beginning. It indicates that the scientific community may be able to put its house in order, and that the National Academy of Sciences can lead in bringing this about.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON