LBJ: Praise for the Value of Research

If words are to be taken at face value, all should now be well between the basic research community and President Lyndon Johnson, who last year aroused considerable concern by asking whether basic research was bringing a good return on its costs. When the President asked that, gloom ensued at points throughout the scientific community, and since then he has been taking some pains to assure scientists that he actually thinks well of them and their work.

The most emphatic of these assurances came on 6 April when he sent to Congress the 16th annual report of the National Science Foundation* and accompanied it with a letter that, in effect, said there is nothing like basic research for making this a better world. "Scientific research," declared the President, "is the key with which we unlock the doors of the future. As a nation we have learned this only recently." Stating that now "the quality of our research is second to none," the President said, "We intend to maintain this high standard. The task we have set for ourselves is to wrest from Nature the intellectual treasures with which we will build the world of tomorrow."

The President went on to cite a great number of devices, materials, and techniques that have resulted from scientific research. And he added, "We know that we can continue this flow of benefits to mankind only if we have a large and constantly replenished pool of basic knowledge and understanding to draw upon. . . . We intend to maintain such a pool with all our talents and resources, so that we can apply it to our needs. Perhaps most important, we intend to maintain this pool of basic knowledge and understanding because of the stimulus it provides to our young minds in this challenge of ideas. Knowledge, as we have learned from our rich experience, is not a laboratory curiosity. It is a critical tool for our national health, our national growth, and the sound education of all of us." NSF, he continued, "is entrusted, more than any other single national institution, with the responsibility to expand our reservoir of scientific knowledge through research, and to promote excellence in our scientific education."

A similarly strong statement of support for research was contained in a telegram the President sent on 18 April to the 48th annual meeting of the American Geophysical Union, in Washington. "The AGU," the telegram stated, "is especially aware that mankind cannot fully share in the earth's abundance without stimulating the development of its resources."

Praising the international Upper Mantle Project, the President's telegram stated that "the need to treat the earth as a whole makes international cooperation imperative."

On 26 April, just a few hours after returning from Konrad Adenauer's funeral in Germany, the President appeared briefly before the American Physical Society. "I wanted to meet with you," he said, "because no group of Americans is more important or has more to offer our country than the American Physical Society."

As kind as these words are, there are many scientists who believe that the overall picture of federal support for research reflects an incongruity between the President's praise and his budgetary decisions. The view from the White House, however, is that in a time of tight budgets research has fared relatively well, and, in comparison with other federally supported programs, such is the case. In virtually every field of research, the Johnson administration has annually increased the amount of federal support. The problem is that the pace of increase has not kept up with the appetites of the old-time recipients and the hopes of new competitors for shares of the money that the federal government provides for research.

If there is any disappointment as a result of the President's statements it is likely to be among those who will take exception to his emphasis on the usefulness of research. For the basic research community this poses a delicate issue in its relations with a President who is understandably eager to solve innumerable pressing problems. In an introduction to the annual report, NSF director Leland J. Haworth touched on the subject of utility in noting that generous public support for research and interest in its applications are "not always accompanied by an understanding of the fact that great caution must be practiced in this area lest attempts to mold basic science in the direction of immediate usefulness not only hurt basic science itself, but also, at least in the long run, thwart its very purpose."

Three years ago, Haworth put the matter somewhat more strongly, in a speech to the National Academy of Sciences. Addressing his fellow scientists, Haworth said, "We . . . know the great cultural and intellectual value of science. But we are not good salesmen. The cultural argument, of course, competes with similar arguments for other fields of learning. And we would, in my opinion, be hard put to prove uniqueness for science in this sense. Large federal sums for culture's sake can only come when all culture is heavily supported. So for the present our best drawing card for financial support is the ultimate usefulness of science. I do not defend that this is so; I simply state it as a fact."

It was a fact in 1964, and the President's messages indicate that it is still a fact.—D.S.G.

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* *NSF Publication 67-1*, 55 cents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. A companion volume, "Grants and Awards, 1966," *NSF Publication 67-2*, lists recipients of NSF funds by name and institution; it is available from the Government Printing Office for $1.