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## A Partisan Attack on Research

Congressmen serving on committees dealing with aspects of research and development generally become knowledgeable about their areas of responsibility. As a result, they are often well disposed toward support of scientific research. However, as politicians they cannot afford to be so partisan as to become vulnerable. They must take into account tides of public opinion and matters likely to affect opinion, such as articles in mass-circulation magazines.

Several congressmen have commented privately on the adverse impact on their constituents of an article entitled "The great research boondoggle," which appeared recently in a monthly publication. As a partisan document, the article is a triumph. Research is confused with development, and the reader is left with the impression that the annual cost of government-supported research is \$16 billion. Then research is downgraded by citation of examples likely to seem ridiculous to the reader and by skillful choice of guilt-connoting words—such phrases as "federal research craze," "complex jungle of federal research," "sprawling research program," "research bug," "lucrative contracts," "profitable parasite industry," and "getting fat at the public trough."

In the article 12 specific government-supported projects are cited as examples. Most of these involve the social sciences, which receive a tiny fraction of the funds. For example, the article quotes Senator Proxmire as attacking the National Institutes of Health as a "worst offender" for supporting projects designated "A Social History of French Medicine, 1789–1815" (\$11,782); "Emergence of Political Leadership: Indians in Fiji" (\$10,917); and "Changing Patterns of [Moslem] Family Life" (\$28,755).

Similarly, the Department of Agriculture was cited for spending 5 years "revising pickle standards." The Office of Education drew mention in an unfavorable context because it supported research on "understanding the fourth-grade slump in creative thinking."

A knowledgeable observer might smile at so much ado about so little. However, a less astute reader could be left with the impression that a large fraction of NIH and other federal funds is spent in irrelevant areas.

No enterprise supported by the federal government should be free of criticism. Research is no exception. Some scientists have questioned aspects of the science establishment with the goal of making government expenditures more effective. It is desirable that such self-policing continue. However, the article in question illustrates a cost of public self-criticism. It seems very damaging when it quotes a prominent scientist out of context as saying that federal support has encouraged "shoddy, redundant, uncritical and ill-conceived research." The article is also very damaging when it quotes a professor of chemistry at a large university as saying that government support of research is "potentially the most powerful destructive force the higher educational system has ever faced."

Congressmen can easily judge the validity of magazine articles. Politicians, however, cannot be expected to assume all the burden of setting the record straight. Scientists must help ensure that the public has an accurate understanding of what it is getting for its money.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON