

Secret Research: Tightrope Act on Capitol Hill

Opponents of classified research on university campuses may be interested to learn that their activities during the last academic year have not gone unnoticed in Washington. Keepers of the Congressional purse were particularly vigorous during this year's hearings on appropriations, questioning Defense research director John Foster about how he intended to deal with his academic miscreants. And Foster was in the delicate spot of having to contrive responses that would keep all his constituencies happy. If he stressed the point that classified research was crucial, he ran the risk of making the universities appear unwilling to serve the national interest; if he suggested that it was not crucial, he risked raising the question "If you don't need it, why are you doing it?" But Foster had also to look over his other shoulder toward his clients in the universities. If he had seemed too severe or threatened to penalize the recalcitrants, he would have validated the fears of the academic critics who assert that sponsorship by the Defense Department is a threat to independence. If he had seemed too lenient, he might have encouraged more unrest. Here is how Foster walked the tightrope:

MR. LIPSCOMB (Glenard P. Lipscomb, R-Calif.): It has been mentioned in the press recently that some of the universities doing business with the government are refusing to do any more work that is of a classified nature.

DR. FOSTER: Yes, that is correct for a few schools. Even these however conduct studies on unclassified subjects relating to defense.

MR. ANDREWS (George F. Andrews, D-Ala.): In other words, they do the work they want to do, and not the work you want them to do.

DR. FOSTER: No sir. I believe they are willing to work on problems which are of mutual interest.

MR. ANDREWS: That is what I say. They take the work they want to do, but they do not want to do all of the work you want them to do.

DR. FOSTER: Not all of it, apparently.

MR. ANDREWS: Have you given any thought to taking it all away from them if they will not do the classified part?

DR. FOSTER: I do not think that would help us. We need their help. I am disappointed that we cannot get as much as they could give us, but I am grateful for that which they are willing to do.

MR. LIPSCOMB: Is there any organized effort or group that is advocating this policy with the universities?

DR. FOSTER: I do not know of an organized group as such.

Subsequently Foster provided for the record a statement denying that pressure against classified research was attributable to an "organized conspiracy." Rather, he said, there has been a "long-standing policy" of opposition to classified research, especially where graduate students are concerned, and it "has nothing to do with the attitude of any professor regarding the Vietnam war."

The members of the appropriations subcommittee appeared somewhat confused and disturbed by Foster's relatively relaxed attitude:

MR. LIPSCOMB: If we accept your statement that the university laboratories are involved in basic research designed to deepen our scientific insights into fundamental problems that impede progress in key areas of defense technology, it seems to me that this is very serious if you are depending on the universities and they start this kind of procedure, not to do the work, which apparently is necessary and needed, because it is classified.

DR. FOSTER: I think that is a slight overstatement, Mr. Lipscomb. Only a few universities have objected to doing secret work.

MR. LIPSCOMB: To me it is difficult to understand people who are interested in the welfare of our country [yet] refuse to do needed basic research for our government . . . I do not understand how they can refuse to help, if the research is needed by the Department of Defense and paid for with government funds, if all of the work is in the interest of our government and the researchers have the capability to do the work.

MR. ANDREWS: If they take that attitude, does the gentleman think the Defense Department should withdraw all work from them. I do.

MR. LIPSCOMB: I think there should be a deep study of this by the Department of Defense. If they are going to pick and choose what they will or will not do, I think it is a bad policy.

MR. ANDREWS: That is right.

DR. FOSTER: As I indicated to Mr. Andrews, I am disappointed that these few universities have taken this position. Nonetheless, I do feel that it would be cutting off our nose to spite our face to refuse to accept their services in those many areas where they can help, want to help, and where we need their help.

MR. ANDREWS: Does it not work just the reverse? Is not the university apt to cut off its nose to spite its face.

DR. FOSTER: I understand your point. As a matter of fact, our universities should have, in my opinion, and do have a degree of independence. A few of them are exercising their independence on this matter.

MR. LIPSCOMB: I know you are disappointed, Dr. Foster, as you say, but I think you ought to reevaluate your position and take a look at it.

DR. FOSTER: I would be glad to do that.

MR. LIPSCOMB: Or at least make some effort to convince the universities how much in error they are. At least, in my opinion, they are in error. This is not just a make-work project for the universities to get government funds?

DR. FOSTER: I assure you, Mr. Lipscomb, that in no case is there any just make-work project.

The House committee was evidently not persuaded, and voted to cut about \$13 million from the part of the \$400-million budget for Defense research that goes to colleges and universities. The Senate has not yet acted—E. L.