

# Letters

## Congressional Research Support of Indirect Costs

L. K. Pettit ("Congress, confusion, and indirect costs," 21 Mar., p. 1301) states that a letter from me constituted the most proximate stimulus for the introduction by Senator Mansfield of an amendment to the FY 69 Appropriations Act for the Department of Defense to limit payments for indirect costs on federal research grants and contracts. The discussion of this matter in the *Congressional Record* (3 Oct. 1968) was confusing indeed. But it is entirely evident that, at most, our correspondence was only peripherally germane.

As Pettit noted, my letter supported rather than deplored the overall manner in which federal funds for research have been utilized. The actual components of the six categories of expenditure noted in the table which he reproduced were explained in considerable detail; careful reading would not permit their interpretation as indicating payments for "indirect costs" equal to 75 percent of total expenditures. Accordingly, I was surprised to find that letter used as a preamble to an attack on the propriety and magnitude of indirect cost payments. When, subsequently, I protested to Senator Mansfield that "the thrust of my letter was precisely in the opposite direction," he replied, on 15 Oct., that "I specifically stated on the floor what your recommendation was, that you had specifically rejected this approach (a statutory limitation on indirect cost payments) but that I had specifically rejected your recommendation."

Indirect costs are real indeed and they must be met, else the university must founder. Nor should this be accomplished at the expense of other functions of the university. However, perpetual discussions of the "indirect costs problem" needlessly confuse and conceal the underlying, important questions such as: How should American society support its colleges and universities? What should be the nature

of the partnership between the federal government and the universities with respect to graduate education and research? By what mechanisms should funds be transferred from the federal government to the universities, their faculties, and students, in support of that single enterprise which is research, graduate, and postdoctoral education? Is the university an appropriate setting for important research conducted by nonteaching staff, if such there be? To what extent is research itself the business of the university?

Withal, it remains true that federal funds appropriated in the name of research by the Congress do contribute substantially to the essential functioning of the university, by construction of physical plant, defraying faculty salaries, paying at least partial costs—as "indirect costs"—for operations without which the university could not function in any case, supporting the research which constitutes the leading edge of the intellectual endeavor and personally subsidizing a large fraction of all graduate students. Are not the universities better qualified for their role in society because their faculties have been significantly expanded but with lighter individual teaching responsibilities? Pettit obfuscated when he chose to ignore the variety of insights into the federal-university relationship afforded by the fact that, of \$1.67 billion in federal funds in support of research at the universities in FY 67, only one-quarter was utilized for the usual purposes of the classical research grant-in-aid: equipment, supplies, travel, publications, and salaries of those employed solely for the purposes of the research project; that is, technicians and postdoctoral fellows. There may well be justice in the complaint that the funds provided pay less than full cost. This can be established by appropriate accounting procedures and should be rectified where it occurs. But the universities' case is weakened by deprecating the enormous contribution of research support to the total academic endeavor while proclaiming

their inability to meet the deficits thus incurred.

Pettit complains that "The basic problem with the Handler letter is that it neglected the very important task of explaining to the Senate just what indirect costs are." But I had not been asked to do so. My letter specifically replied to an inquiry from Senator Mansfield which made no mention of "indirect costs" but posed the two questions cited by Pettit. However, Pettit might have noted my passing references to indirect costs: "... support of the total apparatus of the university and consist very largely of salary payments to the wide diversity of personnel—from janitors to secretaries, purchasing agents and deans—all of whom are necessary to the overall functioning of the university and whose numbers and importance have been markedly increased by the scale of the academic research endeavor." And, later, "If the other funds were not appropriately expended, it would be impossible to utilize the \$426 million of immediate research costs in an intelligent and useful fashion." I find it ironic that, in a five-page article addressed specifically to this subject, Pettit also neglected to explain "just what indirect costs are."

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## Czechoslovakia: Extend a Hand

One can only agree that Western scientists have a certain responsibility toward their colleagues in Czechoslovakia (Letters, 10 Jan.). However, the nature of this responsibility is open to question. Contrary to Hymen's suggestion, there is little likelihood that science in Czechoslovakia will wither away, or that there will be restraints put upon free investigation of scientific problems. I worked for a year in the Institute of Physiology in Prague, was present during the invasion, and revisited Prague some weeks after it, and I can attest that scientific work has not been hindered, nor has the active political interest that Czech scientists take in their country's affairs abated. What is more likely is that Czech science will suffer through well-intentioned but misdirected efforts by Western scientists. A letter from the AAAS to the Academy of Sciences in Moscow might make us feel a lot better, but it could provide evi-