

# Why Government Should Not Fund Science

The National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health should be abolished, and along with them all government aid to higher education, says the distinguished economist and Nobel laureate Milton Friedman.

Friedman's views are of interest both on their own account and because Friedman is an adviser to Republican candidate Ronald Reagan.

In *Free to Choose*, the best-selling book written to accompany the Public Broadcasting System television series,

for really innovative projects unless you have a man who is extremely eminent. But if you have some person at the bottom of the academic totem pole, who has some crazy idea, he can't get funded," Friedman notes.

Friedman strongly believes that private patrons would come forward to support all worthwhile scientific research if the government withdrew from the scene, and would do so more efficiently. But there is another important reason besides cost for his wanting the government out, and that

*Creative researchers would do more, at lesser cost, if allowed to pursue their own goals, say the Friedmans.*



George S. Stigler Photo

Milton and Rose Friedman suggest that government support of universities has a chilling effect on the academic community's willingness to speak out and criticize. "We believe that the National Science Foundation, the National Foundation for the Humanities, and tax subsidies to higher education are all undesirable and should be terminated," the Friedmans assert.

Freedom of speech is precious, but abolishing the NSF to guarantee it seemed a drastic remedy. *Science* called to inquire what Milton Friedman would like to see put in the NSF's place.

"Nothing," he replied without hesitation, and launched into a disquisition, as rapid, limpid, and sparkling as a mountain stream, as to why the Treasury, the citizenry, and the advancement of science would all be better off without the NSF and other research agencies.

First, Friedman explained, projects undertaken by the government cost much more than the same projects in private hands. Then there is the enormous hidden cost of the misuse of people's talents. "The scientific ability of really able people is being diverted from the goals they would like to pursue themselves to the goals devised by government officials," Friedman explains.

He tells a story of Leo Szilard, the Hungarian polymath who used to be a colleague of his at the University of Chicago: "When Szilard applied for grants he always proposed to do experiments that he had in fact already done, so that he could use the money for research whose outcome he could not predict. The system worked perfectly until one year his application was rejected on the grounds that the proposed experiment was impossible."

The bureaucratic factor may not only divert or waste creative people's efforts, it may also prevent the best research from being done at all. "You can't get government support

has to do with ethics. "What ethical justification do you have for extracting tax money from people for purposes that do not yield them some greater benefit? You have to be able to say that the extra dollar spent on research will produce more than a dollar's worth of benefit to the person from whom the dollar was taken. That is a hard proposition to establish in the case of science," states Friedman.

The perverse distributive effects of all government aid to higher education is a subject that vexes him deeply. He considers it a flagrant example of the poor being taxed to benefit the rich. "There is no other program that shows to such an extent the corruptive effect of government goals," Friedman alleges. He imputes hypocrisy to his academic colleagues who profess egalitarianism but accept in the form of government grants the money exacted from lower income taxpayers. "I would abolish all government support of higher education," he declares.

Asked if he would make this recommendation to Governor Reagan, Friedman laughs and says of course he would do so if his advice were asked: "But to campaign on that, I would say no—I am realistic."

Even conceding all the assumptions of Friedman's argument—that much government-funded research is unnecessary, that the rest could be supported more efficiently by private voluntary activity, that the quality of research would improve under private patronage—how could one be sure that enough private capital would materialize to fund all worthwhile research?

"On whom should the burden of proof be?" Friedman asks in reply— "On those who wish to extract money from the low-income taxpayer, or on those who argue the other way? I challenge you to find a single study justifying the amount of money now being spent on government support of research." —NICHOLAS WADE