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International Science

Those who have participated in international scientific activities are generally enthusiastic about the values flowing from them. Activities favored include postdoctoral training, sabbaticals, individual visits, closed symposia, and work at shared major facilities. The benefits include the advancement of science, awareness of advances elsewhere, and a contribution to international amity.

I have repeatedly encountered scientists who have spent a year or more in the United States. Their friendliness has been most heartwarming. These people have often been successful in science and, in addition, have reached important positions in their homelands. All too frequently, around the world the United States is lied about or criticized unfairly. Our scientist friends quietly help to limit the damage from such propaganda. They are some of the best ambassadors of goodwill for this country.

But too many of these friends are no longer young. They were brought here in the postwar period, when support for foreign fellows was liberal. Since then, funds for postdoctoral fellowships for scientists from other countries have decreased. This is unfortunate. At the postdoctoral level identification of talented scientists is relatively easy. The good judgment of an international network of scholars can be utilized to place these young people in spots where they can attain growth in stature while participating in frontier research. A number of biomedical fellowships are available, but the picture is dismal in other areas of the natural sciences.

Humans apparently have a deep-seated need for interaction. The number of sessions of various clubs and organizations must amount to millions each year. In much of human activity, participants play a zero-sum game—there are winners and losers. Those who have not participated in creative scientific work tend to assume that interactions of scientists are also zero-sum events, but this is usually not true. What is often different about the interactions of scientists, particularly in small groups and in one-on-one situations, is that mutual benefits can accrue. Highly creative scientists get much of their stimulus and fresh ideas from interaction with their peers. They believe strongly in the net positive value of such contacts and are hence impatient and critical when actions of government interfere with the mobility of scientists.

In Washington, the view seems to be that we are superior, that we can only lose by interaction with foreign scientists. We have much to learn from others, and our position will not be improved by isolation from them. One factor that may not be appreciated is the behavior of scientists in one-on-one situations. These are very effective modes of interchange, whether they occur at the time of scheduled meetings or otherwise. Top scientists understand that in order to get information, one must give it. They spend little time in situations in which a balanced or favorable exchange is not forthcoming. Rather they seek encounters which can be mutually rewarding and where enthusiasms can be shared. One of the mistakes made by the Soviet Union is its restriction of the travel of its top scientists. If and when it sends representatives to meetings, they are usually second-raters or party hacks. Their quality is recognized and they are accorded the status they deserve. They get little. In contrast, there have been excellent, mutually rewarding interchanges with scientists of our NATO allies. We should make a special effort to foster those relationships. In addition, interactions with our hemispheric neighbors have been good and these should be increased.

Most human activities lead to little in the way of constructive residues. Much effort goes into zero-sum games. Along with literary, artistic, and musical creative efforts, science is among the few activities that leave a lasting heritage and also tend to promote international amity rather than foster tensions. In a violence-prone world, it is necessary to be prepared to defend oneself. But is there no or little room for constructive activities that make some contribution toward conciliation?—PHILIP H. ABELSON