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Congressional Pork Versus Peer Review

The National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) recently got caught in cross fire between President Bush and Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), chairman of the powerful Senate appropriations committee. The true extent of casualties might not be known for some time, but there is plenty of reason for the scientific community to be worried.

It started with Bush criticizing the practice of congressional pork barrel and requesting a rescission of funds for a number of such projects. Byrd, who is known for appropriating funds for numerous projects in West Virginia, decided to retaliate by comparing NSF and NIH grants with congressional pork. In a letter to AAAS, Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), who chairs the subcommittee that handles NSF's appropriation, states: "At the request of Senator Byrd... grants given by the NSF and the NIH were reviewed for potential rescissions." She goes on to say, "Thirty-one NSF grants and three NIH grants were selected and approved by Senator Byrd..." The Senate subsequently proposed killing these grants outright, but the House balked, and in the final bill \$2 million was taken back from NSF without legally requiring cancellation of the 31 grants. However, the bill was accompanied by a "report" providing "guidance" to NSF. While not having the force of law, such guidance is seldom ignored, because agencies fear the powerful appropriation committees.

Referring to NSF, the report states, "The conferees agree to this rescission of \$2 million because it represents the approximate total amount originally awarded by the Foundation for 31 research projects contained in the original Senate amendment. The conferees do not believe that these 31 awards represent a prudent use of taxpayer funds...[and]...strongly urge the NSF to review the option of eliminating funds which remain unobligated for the 31 research projects..."

It is regrettable that NSF and NIH grantees have become pawns in a battle between Congress and the Administration. These grants simply are not in the same category as congressional pork barrel, and it is shameful for Congress to have tried to make it seem that they are. The grants resulted from a competitive process in which scientific excellence on a national level was emphasized. In contrast, pork barrel projects deliberately bypass competitive evaluation. Bush was correct to attack congressional pork. All Americans resent pork barrel politics in which their tax dollars go to a few districts represented by powerful legislators.

The congressional report does not stop with an attack on specific grants. It actually seeks to change the criteria by which NSF selects all grants. The report states, "The conferees believe the Foundation should emphasize research that is focused on the fundamental laws and systems of science, that supports the nation's technological base, that supports the nation's economic competitiveness, and that improves the nation's mathematics and science education endeavors. As a result, the conferees direct the NSF to review its grant selection process and report to the Congress on how it intends to ensure that projects which do not meet these criteria go unsupported with taxpayer dollars in the future."

This is a poor way to make national science policy. Excellence, which most scientists would say should be the principal criterion, is not even mentioned. Economic competitiveness, while important, is not a good basis for selecting individual projects in basic research because, as any scientist knows, basic research is too unpredictable. For example, who—scientist or politician—might have predicted at the time that research leading to discovery of restriction enzymes was going to become a major contributor to economic competitiveness?

Most of the 31 grants listed in the report are in the social sciences. Moreover, the criteria proposed for selecting grants could be construed as intentionally biased against the social sciences. An attack on the social sciences is an attack on all science and should be rejected by the scientific community.

NSF's response to this situation to date is surprising because it seems to imply that they agree with the report. NSF's official spokesman stated, "They're sending us an important message, and I think we'll take a long hard look at it."

Perhaps NSF believes all of this will blow over and Congress, having made its point with the Administration, will never again try to play NSF program officer. On the other hand, a precedent has been set, and if no one objects, it will be all that much easier the next time around.

Richard S. Nicholson