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Political Action in Behalf of Science

Last year, when the Johnson Administration placed a ceiling on federal expenditures, support of scientific research was cut more sharply than most other items in the federal budget. In general, scientists cooperated without grumbling in what they hoped was a one-time emergency. Recent events indicate that this hope has been denied and that a combination of cuts and inflation will bring a 2-year reduction in academic research of about 20 percent. Responsibility for this reduction rests both on the Congress and on the Executive and has a bipartisan basis. The Nixon Administration's effort to increase the budget of the National Science Foundation has been thwarted thus far by the Democratic-controlled House Appropriations Committee. In turn, in allocating a \$3.5 billion expenditure cut, which amounts to a little over 3 percent of the discretionary budget, the Executive branch discriminated against medical research. At first, support was slashed by more than 20 percent, a situation which obtained for more than a month. Later, when the matter was made public in front-page newspaper stories, the drop was rescinded and replaced by a 5- to 10-percent cut.

News of the deep cut was first brought into the open this month at a session of the American Chemical Society in New York. The audience was dismayed. Later, one observer commented, "We are witnessing a mindless dismantling of the American scientific enterprise." To prevent further destruction scientists must engage in broadly based, long-term, thoughtful political action.

Major decisions with respect to government support of science are made by politicians. They, in turn, are responsive to public opinion, to material in the mass media (especially the press), to the intervention of influential citizens, and to their own experience and observations. Scientists have been fairly active in informing the public about constructive aspects of their work. Scientists have neglected the important opportunities inherent in direct contacts with politicians.

Politicians operate with the pressing knowledge that they can be effective only if they can be elected. In consequence, they are especially sensitive to the opinions and demands of those of their constituents who have, or can employ, substantial political influence. For example, a politician pays attention to the words of the president of a major educational institution in his district, and to its distinguished alumni. In general, the politician gives personal attention to letters from such influential persons and makes himself available for conversations. Accordingly, scientists should make special efforts to communicate with politicians through top men associated in any way with their institutions.

Another mechanism for influencing politicians is illustrated by action taken in one district in the Midwest. Two colleges jointly invited their congressman to spend a day with them. On that occasion scientists at the colleges described their research and how it was interacting with the education of undergraduates. They showed him equipment provided by the National Science Foundation and told him of other support they had received from that source. The congressman was impressed with what he saw and heard, and stated that he had not realized the extent and importance of such federal support.

Scientists can stop the mindless dismantling of American science. They have the wit and energy to develop the political clout necessary to do the job, and they should get about that business.—PHILIP H. ABELSON

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