

We Need a Lobby for Basic Research:
Here's How It Might Be Done

March 14, 1973

Recently it was my privilege to attend a dinner at the Papanicolaou Cancer Research Institute, where Prof. Sol Spiegelman received the 1972 Pap Award for outstanding research in cancer. The dinner speaker was Dr. Christian Anfinsen, and he spoke about "Why All Biological and Chemical Research Is Important to Solution of the Cancer Problem!" Anfinsen appealed to his audience to protest to their Congressmen about the reduction in the Federal budget's support of basic scientific research. While I would also urge readers to make the same protest, I should also point out that I have doubts about the effectiveness of such a campaign at this point. In my experience, Congressmen have rarely considered support of basic research especially rewarding or sufficiently attractive as a political hobbyhorse. There have been, of course, great exceptions like the late Lister Hill. But, as a "cause," support of basic research is too vague, too unfocused to serve for any length of time as a rallying point of public and Congressional enthusiasm.

Today, however, we find ourselves in a situation in which it seems to me, and many others, extremely important to develop such support. We have been

told, on the one hand, that there shall be an "all-out war against cancer," while, on the other, we see the Federal government slashing basic research funds. To use a military analogy, this is not a little like a commander's recommending strategic bombing as he drastically reduces his air power.

As a "cause", basic research lacks a "hook", a specific appeal, and as a result we have no such organization as an "American Foundation for Basic Scientific Research" that might profit from our country's fitful philanthropy.¹ The American public is very generous in its support of philanthropies--both our historical Protestant ethic and our currently enforceable tax legislation incline us to be so. But the public is also very fickle, and impatiently sentimental in its philanthropies.

Fads come and go, as success fails to materialize and as the emotional appeal of different causes waxes and wanes. Any professional fund-raiser would have been very dreary about prospects of raising even a thin dime for research on amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), until, however, ALS became for a brief time familiar to the public as The Disease That Killed Lou Gehrig.² One

wonders indeed whether, except for the acumen and tenacity of its most famous victim, the American public would even as yet have been so skillfully lobbied into its support of the research that has all but wiped out poliomyelitis. Pollution is somewhat less of a public concern than it was a few years ago—the energy crisis has taken over some of the headline space and the spot television commercials. “Birth defects” enjoys now relatively little of the “popularity” developed for it by the thalidomide affair. And so it goes.

As an object of philanthropy, I'm afraid an American Foundation for Basic Scientific Research would starve to death. But without basic research, organizations like the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, and so on, know that they can do little to achieve their individual objectives. In the absence of basic research funds and basic research findings, the function, if not the emotional appeal, of such organizations, will simply atrophy.

I find it somewhat ironic that one of the newer and most recently publicized “causes” is that of aging research. In the *New York Times*³ recently the problem of longevity became front-page news. I had already seen the article in *New Scientist*⁴ on which the *Times* story was obviously based. In the *Times*, Walter Sullivan points out the areas of scientific research which may affect in common our understanding of cancer as well as aging. I

don't think it necessary for me to belabor any further the obviously basic and multidisciplinary nature of the two problems.

The philanthropic foundation is very much a part of the American way of life. If, however, as I have suggested above, it can't emotionally espouse the cause of basic scientific research, then I propose that we enlist another phenomenon at which Americans show great skill: the political lobby.

Since the Heart, Cancer, Fibrosis, etc. organizations must know of their dependence on basic research, I suggest that it would be sensible for them to do exactly what they would do if they were “business” organizations rather than “scientific” organizations: they would support a lobbyist in Washington to promote support of their common need, basic research. They might even be shrewd enough to instruct such a lobbyist to vigorously promote support of *any* specific research that currently strikes the public's and the Congress's fancy, so as to strengthen the scientific research front at every point possible. For example, such a lobby might have worked full time to prevent the recent disastrous cuts in training grants.

I must acknowledge that agreement on such joint ventures can be difficult to achieve. There may even be legal obstacles to it, since our laws do not permit tax-exempt non-profit organizations to lobby. Hence, I would suggest that one of the “richer” associations finance basic-research lobbyists to pro-

mote public, as well as Congressional support of basic research. That might be strategically more effective than to attempt to extract more money from the present administration in the name of cancer, heart, fibrosis, aging, etc. It cannot be forgotten that a lobby to Congress alone is not the solution. The public must also be involved at the grass-roots level.

The funding of full-time lobbyists for basic research could be dealt with immediately and in a practical way by some philanthropist who truly appreciates the relationship between basic research and medical problem solving. In simple terms, that means basic research needs its Mary Lasker. Had there been added to Mr. Nobel's vision something of M. de Tocqueville's insight,⁵ he might have provided for scientific lobbies as well as scientific awards. Considering the number of American Nobel laureates, they might, in the manner of an alumni association, consider forming a committee to find or finance such a lobby.

1. Recently, it has been proposed that a "National Foundation for Biomedical Research" be formed to "collect and disseminate cost benefit data [on the value of scientific

research] to fellow scientists." (See: Fudenberg, H.H. A National Foundation for Biomedical Research? *Federation Proceedings* 32(1):1-2, 1973). Such a foundation would thus provide its members ammunition for their individual attempts to persuade legislators of the need to support research. Fudenberg's suggestion, in my opinion, doesn't go far enough.

2. Lou Gehrig was a much-admired and much-beloved American baseball player, who, like the recently deceased Roberto Clemente, can be used to illustrate that the shining hero of sports mythology sometimes actually exists.
3. *New York Times*, February 11, 1973, p. 1, 52.
4. Davies, D., A Shangri-La in Ecuador. *New Scientist* 57(831): 236-8, 1972.
5. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* cannot but amaze any reader who comes to it for the first time, as it must continue to amaze those, like me, who having read it before, are living through situations and developments sketched out more than a hundred years ago by the Frenchman's truly incredible insight into the American character. Not surprisingly, I find de Tocqueville's book was cited six times in the 1971 *Science Citation Index*[®], about four times as often as the average scientific publication.