

Congressional Approval
of NSF Grants;
The Public Wants In!

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The House of Representatives recently passed an amendment to the fiscal 1976 authorization Bill for the National Science Foundation (NSF). The amendment was proposed by Rep. Robert E. Bauman, Republican, of Maryland. It would give the Congress a veto over NSF's grant awards. The veto could be wholesale, denying support of areas of research, or it could be item-by-item specific, denying this or that grant, if voted by the Congress.

The Bauman Amendment reads, in part: "Notwithstanding any other provision of this or any other act, every 30 days, the Director of the NSF shall transmit to both Houses of Congress a message containing: (1) a list of grants, proposed to be made by the NSF and, (2) all facts, circumstances, and considerations relating to or bearing upon the decision of the NSF to approve such grants, including to the maximum extent practicable the manner in which the national interest will be fostered by the approval of such grants..."

My main purpose here is to call your attention to the *impatience, frustration*, and *distrust* implicit in this

amendment. The words "including to the maximum extent practicable" imply that the Congress wants scientists to explain what they're doing. In asking how "the national interest will be fostered by the approval of such grants," they are saying they've heard enough 'scientific gobbledegook': *We will now force you to talk in our language!*

If you find the Bauman Amendment surprising, I would suggest that your surprise is indicative of the very thing that has enabled the amendment to be passed so easily.

Certainly the NSF's reported reaction to the amendment is no surprise. "Nightmare...disaster...mind-boggling...politicization" were words quoted in one report.¹ "Mischievous...intrusion...unacceptable," are quotes from the stunned but even more indignant Philip Handler, president of the National Academy of Sciences.² However, H. Guyford Stever, director of NSF, seems to understand very well the signal sent out by Congress: "...It is a signal which all scientists should heed."³

Beyond this, as far as I can see, the scientific community betrays

comparatively little true concern. Were such a radical proposal to affect railroad men, mail clerks, or teachers, there would be picket lines in front of the White House and the Capitol.

It may be that House passage of the amendment will turn out to be a good thing. Perhaps this development will shake our lethargy enough to produce some permanent improvement. Perhaps the amendment will accomplish what more activist and discerning scientists among us have failed to accomplish. They have failed to convince the rank and file scientist as well as the elite that the public wants, needs, and deserves to hear what scientists have to say—about what they are doing and why they are doing it. The noble vagueness of such generalities as “The advancement and diffusion of knowledge” is no longer adequate explanation for the expenditure of billions.

The very least that’s necessary now is to expand support for the ‘scientific lobby’ I have previously discussed.^{4,5} Why, for example, does the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) have a membership of only 6500? Consider that the FAS is the only organization legally licensed to lobby on behalf of science.

A broadly supported lobby for science would undoubtedly be of considerable help in the public relations science so badly needs to develop. It might have prevented proposal of the amendment by preventing all the misunderstandings that preceded it. In the words of Jeremy Stone, director of

the FAS, “My Washington experience has persuaded me that only a vigorous and organized representation of the scientific community in Washington can assure that science will be neither misused nor mistreated.”⁶

If scientists cannot or will not do the job of public education and legislative liaison that modern science both deserves and owes, then we must accept the Bauman Amendment or other much worse consequences. We have no right to complain how the Congress attempts to do the job, unless we offer constructive alternatives. Were you a Congressman, would you ignore “pressure from constituents not to fund seemingly irrelevant projects with seemingly incomprehensible titles”?³

The public’s representatives would like to know about and play some role in the expenditure of public money. Next year, the United States will grandly celebrate the Bicentennial of our forefathers’ momentous insistence upon that principle. If we want the Congress to ask probing questions of the Defense Department, then why not of NSF, and other organizations that spend billions in public support of scientific research? In fact, I think science will gain if it can succeed in getting the Congress to *ask* enough questions. When we provide the answers we will impress upon legislators how much more support we need to get all the scientific information necessary to solve national problems.

The apathy of the scientific establishment to assault on its citadel is often interpreted as arrogance. As I've said before, the elite of science will somehow manage.⁷ Just as they find a way to publish, with or without page charges, they will find a way to obtain research funds.

Hopefully, passage of the amendment in the House will now invigorate us to make clear what science is, what its potential is, what its use is. Professor Fowler's recent explanation in *Science*⁸ of the return on investment of NSF support is useful, but it is inadequate to the emotional level of Congress and the citizenry.

In conclusion, I believe that science has an inadequate voice in the government. We are long past the time to debate whether we need a Secretary of Science in the Cabinet. A Science Advisor to the President is not enough. And we have an inadequate voice outside the government.

In the near future I hope to report on some concrete actions for helping to solve this problem. In the meantime, send your donations to the Federation of American Scientists (203 C Street, N.E., Washington, D.C., 20002) or to the Committee for Biomedical Research (2128 Wyoming Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20008). Most important of all, call or write your Senator. I hope it will not be necessary to urge you later on to wire the President to veto the Bill.

Somehow, science has alienated itself from the society which nourishes it. Science has failed dismally to make plain what Professor Fowler calls the "compassionate use of knowledge."⁸ Its scorn of 'public relations' in the past may now force science into the harder job of attempting it in a Congressional committee room. But the job will have to be done, whether it is done there or elsewhere. The longer the job is put off, the higher the price science will pay.

1. Zerkel F H. Amendment threatens NSF grant procedures. *Chem. Eng. News* 1975(21 April):17-18.

2. Anon. House vote to control grants scored by head of science unit. *New York Times*, 23 April 1975, p. 46.

3. Shapley D. Congress: House votes veto power on all NSF research grants. *Science* 188:338-41, 25 April 1975.

4. Garfield E. We need a lobby for basic research; here's how it might be done. *Current Contents*® (CC®) No. 11, 14 March 1973, p. 5-7.

5. ----- Biomedical and health care systems research should be financed from

social security and health insurance funds; a permanent lobby could swing it. CC No. 3, 16 January 1974, p. 5-7.

6. Stone J F. Personal communication, 1 May 1975.

7. Garfield E. Page charges, for-profit and non-profit journals, and freedom of the scientific press. CC No. 7, 17 February 1975, p. 5-7.

8. Fowler W A. A foundation for research; the return on investment in scientific research during the first 25 years of support by NSF is discussed. *Science* 188:414-20, 2 May 1975.