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Social Science, Spared Again

LAST MONTH, A U.S. CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEE WISELY DECIDED NOT TO CUT FUNDING OF SOCIAL science research by the National Science Foundation (NSF), despite an attack that cleverly framed the discipline as “good, just not good enough for NSF.” This claim was rebutted across the political spectrum, by physical and biological as well as social scientists, and in the business sector. In May, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) issued a report arguing that NSF-funded social science should be eliminated. Oddly, however, his report endorsed such funding by other agencies, where, one supposes, it meets a priority test. Indeed, the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, and the Congress itself hire, consult, fund, and contract with social scientists in great number. The senator acknowledged that the country needs social science, just not at NSF. This makes no sense. If the country needs social science at all, it needs NSF-supported fundamental research. NSF funds frontier science in physics that underpins more-applied research supported by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. This intelligent division of labor works equally for the social sciences, making continued funding by NSF of the highest priority.

The battle waged against the social sciences is a familiar one. In the 1940s, Vannevar Bush, the director of the Office of Scientific and Research Development, declared social science insufficiently “scientific” to warrant inclusion in NSF. He won the battle but lost the war. Yes, NSF excluded social science, but the nation, as it had during the Depression years and the war years, needed social science. When, in the 1960s, Congress wanted to learn whether policies were working as intended, it did not ask the natural sciences. It issued requests for proposals to the social sciences. Congress even discovered the “human dimensions” in policies that were largely technical in nature, such as disposing of toxic waste or building a space station. The nation needed a science of social behavior and structure. NSF funding for social science started gradually in the 1960s, and by 1975 NSF welcomed a social scientist, Richard Atkinson, as its director, under whose leadership the agency steadily funded basic methodological and theoretical research that underpinned the growing use of social science across the government and in America’s businesses.

But in 1981, the Reagan Administration, initially missing the point, returned to the attack, though with a new rationale: Social science was too successful! The field had helped design Great Society domestic programs that the Reaganites intended to end. In a backhanded compliment, defunding at NSF was a step toward disempowering social science. Wiser heads stepped in. In substantial amounts, private money flowed into neoconservative think tanks, leading to outstanding work by excellent scholars who understood that social science is not inherently pro-market or pro-government. It is a science of social consequences, no less useful for designing market solutions than government policies. In fact, documenting the unintended and costly consequences of the latter justified the former. Thanks to social science, America’s businesses benefitted from operations research, market surveys, employee testing, cost/benefit analysis, and risk assessment. Lobbyists cited social science research to advance anti-tax and deregulation policies. As a result, government-funded social science, NSF included, increased in the Reagan years, from \$197 million [in fiscal year (FY) 1982] to \$373 million (FY 1989).

In 1981, I hesitantly submitted a version of this editorial to *Science*,* doubting that it would be accepted, and was uncertain whether natural scientists, conservative social scientists, or business leaders would support the usefulness of the social sciences. Times have changed. In 2011, *Science* invited this editorial.

– Kenneth Prewitt

10.1126/science.1210207

*K. Prewitt, *Science* 211, 659 (1981).

