

December 2, 2001

Dr. Irwin Feller, Chair
Advisory Committee for Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences
National Science Foundation
c/o Institute for Policy Research & Evaluation
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802

Dear Dr. Feller:

I am writing to ask the leadership of your Advisory Committee to solve two problems: untested foundations of macro-economic theory; and a paralysis in testing ideological assumptions that limits the empirical basis for democratic discussion, undergraduate education, and good policy making.

First, concerning the scientific issues: If there is one thing that unites economists, it is the belief that nothing done by politicians or governments will change individual motivation - it is assumed to be fixed and at a maximum for profit.

By contrast, President Reagan and serious conservative thinkers today (like William Kristol) are remarkably self-assured about their preaching that strong and healthy, responsible, self-starting individuals can be a dependent variable of government (pro-market/no-welfare-state) economic policy and are the key to making the whole package - market economies, democracy, 1,000 points of light and individual lives, work. (I do not believe that Kristol, for example, is afraid of good science - a point to which I will return below.)

These (so called ideological) ideas are in good repute within clinical psychology. Conservatives may be wrong (or right) about the transference - i.e., if the applicable arena turns-out to be only family relationships, rather than a national political economy psychodrama.

The ideas also are legitimate in the neurosciences and the mental health professions - the distribution and properties of vivid hierarchical images & how they affect emotion, motivation, rationality, psychopathology, and social pathologies in the transition from traditional authority to freer societies and market economies.

The untested foundation of macro-economics (i.e., perpetually assuming that motivational coefficients are zero) makes for impressive mathematics and self-assured policy advice. It also perpetually assures that NSF-supported academic economists cannot (and need not?) engage in evidence-based public dialogues with serious, well-founded, important, and competing hypotheses.

(The same civic disengagement occurs for political science. Ray Wolfinger, in American politics, told me two decades ago that we really don't know whether there is anything up there - i.e., conservatives might be right (or wrong) about the alleged strength of growing hierarchical & dependency relations in a US welfare state, but you will not find evidence-based discussions in American politics textbooks. Indeed you could read Philip Converse's life's work - and the entire Michigan School that owns the only sampling frame in American politics - and you will still find silent evasion. Even Robert Dahl's textbooks, the last time that I looked, failed to discuss and evaluate the competing theories of American political & economic life (and efforts to change national modal personality.) (Social psychology textbooks do not mention the theories, or the national experiment of the Reagan years, either.))

- About the issues of political neutering: These are discussed in the attached correspondence with Dr. Bruce Alberts at the National Academy of Sciences. You should know that the strategy to test ideological assumptions came with high-level support. Robert Solow said that the reconstruction of the competing Reaganomics model (enclosed, President Reagan's Counseling) was exactly right. Sidney Verba said that if I were a younger man, I would jump on this. Psychiatrists and analysts in a working group of the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, when I served as Ittelson Consultant, thought the framing of the issues (as questions of the nature and distribution of vivid hierarchical images) was an important step forward¹ and a psychiatrist, Dr. David Hamburg, has spent part of his life for the past 15 years seeking (e.g., as a member of the President's Committee of Advisers on Science and Technology) to encourage support for this type of research.

¹ There is further scientific detail, and a 3 x 3 table, in one of the original papers on www.policyscience.net

I should emphasize that the discussions have involved institutional agenda-setting, not individual grants. The professional staff of the National Academy of Sciences invited me to prepare the enclosed (draft) strategy of how to organize rapid progress in testing ideological assumptions as a potential Academy project. As you will see, a Michelson-Morley type of test would be enormously exciting, but it would require several million dollars and several years, with participation by capable people from several disciplines. It could not be done alone - for example, several new measures need to be developed, and checked for reliability and validity. (Jane Loevinger told me that, working alone, it might require ten years to develop one scale and establish its reliability and validity.) But it would achieve an important result: whatever the findings, they would alter how important parts of our society and the social science community think about important issues. And I think this is what we should be doing - and why, in the broader picture, academic scientists have tenure, so they can ask important and legitimate questions, and challenge reigning orthodoxies even when it makes political zealots of different persuasions, or their colleagues, uncomfortable.

I was deeply grateful, as a young scientist at MIT, to receive an NSF grant to develop the study of government learning rates and how they might be improved. One recommendation was to develop a strategy to understand more deeply, and evaluate fairly, ideological assumptions. At the time, NSF had been passionately interested to identify basic research that could be applied to national needs, and to have science that informed civic dialogues and democratic discussion. In a sense, this is a further Report to you.

I might add that I do not believe we will end with a Final Battle between the Left and the Right. Rather, I think we will arrive at a new dimension, using a framework of vivid hierarchical images (and their distribution, change, and transformation), that finds zones of truth and moves the entire discussion to a new level. Tho I think that it will require a light touch of institutional leadership by your Committee to steer us through the silly behavior.

Yours truly,

(Dr.) Lloyd S. Etheredge, Director
Government Learning Project

cc: Dr. Rita Colwell
Dr. Norman Bradburn
Dr. Eamon Kelly