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Scientists Cloud Research Goals

SCIENTIFIC research and its uses have accounted for a major part of our progress and prosperity. Future advancements are clouded by "mad money," social reformers and scientific nonsense.

We went on a scientific spending binge after the Soviet Union beat us into space with "Sputnik" in 1957. We were told that Russia had more scientists and students than we did.

Congress reasoned that spending more money on science would put us ahead and administrators of educational institutions acquiesced. They were eager to obtain grants to finance laboratories, expand study programs and hire researchers.

These steps were good, except that we began to spend money faster than we could produce scientists. This opened the door for pseudo-scientists, opportunists, social reformers and political activists to get into government science, where the money is.

"Science is neither a magic wand nor a poisoned arrow," observed Sir Bernard Lovell, of England, one of the world's leading radio astronomers and cosmic-ray researchers. We put men on the moon and brought them back, but we also found disappointments.

Not much has been said lately about Russia's superior numbers of scientists (we had 312,700 in 1970), but in 1972, the United States and Russia set up a joint commission on scientific and technical cooperation, a sort of international "show and tell game." The public is wondering if we haven't done most of the showing and most of the telling, while receiving little of value.

Not much has been said, either, about Russia, or any other dictatorship, concerning their use of scientific research to produce food. We still have plenty of food to sell.

Nevertheless, a drive continues to centralize science and research in Washington, through demands for a "national science policy". That obviously would mean national science control.

Scientific research needs large funds to continue the search for knowledge and understanding, for means to feed the world, and for economic development. But merely appropriating more money will not, in itself, accomplish these things.

An anti-science attitude is developing in several places. For example, with obstructionists blocking utilization of nuclear energy, the public is wondering what value it has. Discoveries related to the moon missions have been put into use, but don't ask the average person to provide a list of them.

The anti-science attitude is heightened by federal bureaus that use inadequate, incomplete or misleading scientific reports to frighten or soothe the public, or for other reasons.

Often, the public is faced with conflicting points of view, each based upon "scientific" claims, confusing the issues and contributing to distrust of scientific data in general.

The public also is turned off by well-publicized research projects, such as a study of how apes swing through trees or the Illinois "sex-pot studies" to test effects of marijuana on human sexual responses.

Scientists, as well as the public and public officials, share the blame for confusion concerning the value of research and the proper means to set objectives and obtain useful results.