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June 6, 1955

Hon. Gov. Adlai E. Stevenson  
Chicago, Illinois

Dear Gov. Stevenson:

I am writing to comment on your fine speech last Thursday at the N.Y.U. Medical Center, as reported in Friday's New York Times. There is hardly a word in it at which I could help but applaud, and enthusiastically. In hopes, however, that January 1957 will find you in a better position to do something about the problems you brought up, I want to explain why some scientists (as well as the A.M.A.) may be as apprehensive about too much federal support for research as about too little.

You put your finger on the issue yourself when you referred to the "policy of cutting off grants for private research where there is no conceivable security justification". Do you think this has no bearing on whether "government has any desire or intention to dominate medical education"; isn't this a "hint or whisper of domination"?

I hope and realize that a more enlightened administration will take measures to minimize this "sickness, awful timidity". However, in these days, the power to support research is the power to destroy it, and we should be careful not to leave that power to political whimsy. The only solution that I can see is a procedural one. I mentioned misguided security fears as only one example of the motives that may lead to trouble in the centralized administration of research funds. The administration of the law has become circumscribed by constitutional limitations, for example, the rights of citizens to equal protection of the laws. From contemporary cases, a layman judges that there are no such limits to the discretion of the government when it comes to hiring people for jobs, or the administration of research funds. But these activities have an impact on the liberties of the scientist which is no less than that of the criminal law. Until we have worked out the means of protecting the beneficiaries of governmental gifts from the possibility of arbitrary discretion by administrators outside the law, such gifts may lead to domination in proportion to their indispensability.

Of course I have to agree that increased funds for medical research will be indispensable. The Public Health Service and other agencies have supported my own research program in bacteriology for seven years, with hardly a whisper of how it should be executed. However, congressional appropriations could go a long way in suggesting that grant renewals might come more readily if one's research concerned, say, cancer rather than infectious disease. Is this a whisper? And I have sat on reviewing panels, on the other side of the fence, enough to realize that honest conviction, unaccompanied by conscious intention to dominate, can lead to pressure as to how a grant-applicant ought to do his business. There are dangers of federal domination—they ought to be met squarely and neutralized rather than discounted.

Yours sincerely

(Professor of Genetics, University of Wisconsin)

Joshua Lederberg

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