

June 26, 1967

The Hon. Wilbur J. Cohen  
Under Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare  
Washington, D. C. 20201

Dear Wilbur:

Your letter was waiting for me upon my return from a rather long trip.

Had my connecting flight been five minutes earlier, I would have found myself inadvertently the war correspondent for the Washington Post in the Mid East theater!

About the relationship between fundamental science and targeted research, I suspect that much more will have to be done than a statement from the Secretary. The President has spoken on the issue, and having done so, sets a tone to which a response can be felt throughout the entire structure of federal administration! Every decision made even at the lowest echelons continues to bear the imprint of that tone. This will happen despite the efforts of the Secretary, and yourself, and otherwise, to paint a better picture. The omissions that I complained about in the statement on health certainly did not help. I hope the President himself is aware of the impact of even some of his more casual remarks on the morale of the administration and of the country, for I feel that it is only from his office that we could hope to get a really convincing synthesis of national policy for science.

And even in Mr. Gardner's statement, his remarks on page 7 leave one the suspicion that he himself is convinced that a growth rate figure of considerably less than 15% per year is already predicated. In fact, I would complain about the pre-eminence given to this kind of calculation in the first place. Pages 9 and 10 leave the unmistakable impression that "carefully selected" target programs are indeed going to be in competition for the same funds as basic research. Page 12 does indeed make this point clearly with respect to health services, but the very omission of targeted research accentuates my point.

I am, however, entirely hopeful that the Advisory Committee on University Relationships will be able to work out a more comprehensive and confidence-inspiring statement.

Where is the objectivity referred to on page 14 going to come from? There is an insidious kind of criticism in these remarks that can only feed the resentful attitudes that have been expressed, for example, in Senator Harris's committee to redistribute research support on a geographical basis. The crisis that Secretary Gardner is talking about is in my view largely fueled by exactly these kinds of remarks, which are vague, confusing, and help little to convey the justification for the Secretary's statement on page 6 of protecting the concern that "the individual efforts of the basic researcher will always be in danger of neglect".

W.  
COHEN

The net force of that statement is that "science has been insufficiently objective about its own role and needs", rather than that "science is an important medium of social effort, which we should protect and nurture to the extent our resources reasonably permit". I realize these are all matters of emphasis, but they do have their impact on the decision making processes throughout all the echelons of the department. I perceive this as a matter of my daily business in my dealings with representatives of the NIH.

I am sorry to belabor you with such a long discussion of the distinction between policy and tone, but the latter plays too important a part in the realities of day-to-day life to be ignored.

I thank you for your sympathetic ear.

Cordially,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

P.S. Somewhat to my surprise I am joining the National Advisory Mental Health Council, and this will give me an opportunity, I hope, to see you again before too long.