

editorial

Object lesson from China

The rush in Washington (following on the heels of the voters' approval of California's Proposition 13) to make substantial cuts in the Federal budget triggered a wave of apprehension in physicists and other scientists. The Federal funds for R&D represent a not insignificant fraction of the 25% of the total budget that remains discretionary (not committed by law), and it is hard to think of budget items more politically vulnerable than the "R" part (basic research) of the R&D appropriations.

It is immensely reassuring to learn that President Carter is remaining steadfast in his determination to support the growth of basic research in spite of the extreme pressure for budget reductions in the aftermath of Proposition 13. Earlier this summer the President advised Congress: "As the Congress considers final funding levels for R&D programs, I want to emphasize that even relatively small reductions in key agencies—such as the National Science Foundation—or in new initiatives and growth planned for the mission agencies—including NASA and the Departments of Agriculture, Energy and Defense—would defeat our objectives. Most increments of real growth in these programs are necessary if we are to strengthen the Nation's capacity and productivity in critical areas of research."

The key question, of course, is how Congress will respond. Will the Senate and the House act in the best interests of the country and join the Administration in exempting the fragile, but indispensable, plants of basic research from the impending wholesale budget slashing or will more short-sighted attitudes prevail?

Congressmen tempted by political expediency might do well to ponder the dramatic experience of the People's Republic of China in dealing with this same choice. The 31 August issue of *Nature* contains a special report by Joseph Needham on the status of science in China. Two central conclusions emerge out of Needham's absorbing first-hand observations: The role of the antiscience (especially anti-basic research) policy in the last years of the previous regime contributed more to China's national economic disaster than had been appreciated in the West. The new regime looks to the development of Chinese science and technology as the primary means for making China a modern industrial power and has

given top priority to a program designed to catapult Chinese science into world leadership class by the end of the century (see, for instance, our news story on page 17).

It would truly be a monumental irony if the US—the world leader in science for much of this century—should choose this time to move even somewhat in the opposite direction.

In any case, cuts in basic research funds would have no really significant effect on the Federal budget. Since they are less than 1% of the entire budget, like the seedlings in a forest they represent only a minuscule fraction of the total. But Confucius could well have observed that the man who cuts the seedlings along with the trees will soon have no forest.

Harold L. Davis