

port it has been provided amount to something of a miracle. Or maybe the wonder is that the NSF survived five years of congressional wrangling and another five or so of precarious budgets and then finally took root—a phenomenon that might be counted a miracle at least in terms of the theory of continuous creation.

The problem with either of these notions is that during this same period every major industrial nation has acquired an organization of some kind with the responsibility for supporting basic research. All these countries, moreover, devote about the same proportion of national resources, measured in relation to gross national product, as the United States does to basic research. The reason, in each case, is the same: the fear that by failing to support some basic research the country will jeopardize the future strength of its economic and military capacities. If the American achievement is a miracle, even on a minor scale, it seems to occur with remarkable frequency and at rather predictable orders of magnitude elsewhere as well. The really interesting question about the NSF, which this comparative perspective suggests, is how it differs in structure and function from its counterparts in Britain, France, Germany, Canada, and elsewhere. Now that there is such a wealth of comparable experience against which to measure our own, there can be no convincing justification for continuing to examine the American case as though it were still *sui generis*.

Even from a more parochial domestic perspective, it is impossible to appreciate the impact of the NSF on science and higher education, for better and for worse, without paying much more attention than Lomask does to the ways in which the Foundation provides its support. In discussing the origins of the decision to adopt the grant rather than the contract as the primary instrumentality, Lomask correctly notes that this decision was made by Waterman and his aides, who themselves had come from the Office of Naval Research, where contracts were used exclusively, because their studies and inquiries showed that the grant, with its greater freedom and flexibility, was more appropriate. He fails to point out, however, the important precedent established by the private foundations, which had been the principal supporters of science before the federal government assumed this responsibility. Without this precedent, it is questionable whether any of the federal agencies supporting research would have

been able to avoid the use of contracts, since these were standard in all types of procurement involving nongovernmental agencies.

More important, by adopting the project grant, coupled with peer review, the NSF was able to channel the bulk of the support it received into the laboratories where—in the opinion of the best-qualified specialists in each field—it would yield the best results. In other words, the technique has enabled the scientific community to support the researchers it has judged best qualified even though the funds have been appropriated by a representative system well known for “pork barrel” politics—or, to put the case in its best light, for a concern with equitable distribution among regions, institutions, and qualified individuals. So sacred is the project principle in this country that even when institutional grants have been tried out, they have generally been “formula” grants tied to the degree of project support. Except for the effort in the 1960’s to create new “centers of excellence” and for certain of the fellowship programs, notably the National Defense Education Act, which was formulated by Congress, the project system based on peer review has been the preferred mode of support.

Much has already been written about the consequences of this system for science and for the university system. It remains debatable, however, whether the Foundation is not too much committed to this system both for its own political good and for the good of the research universities. In a period in which the universities must adjust to diminishing levels of support both for research and for education, it is open to question whether exclusive emphasis on the project system does not provide too much autonomy to the individual researcher and too little leverage for the university administration to consolidate and trim existing activities and open up new ones. It is even questionable whether, in view of the pressures the universities are now under not only to cope with overextensions induced by government support but also to endure the burdensome costs and interference with academic freedom due to the vogue for “accountability,” their degree of dependency upon the NSF and other government agencies is as healthy and as welcome as it was once almost universally considered.

No history of the NSF that so neglects its impact on its principal institutional clients can be considered even minimally adequate. A serious historical effort would also have to inquire into the links between the project system and the

American attachment to the liberal ethos, with its traditional emphasis on equality of opportunity and the more recent shift to a stress on equality of results. It would also have to discuss both the remarkable benefits of peer review and the criticisms that have been made of its real and imagined weaknesses.

None of these subjects is explored at all adequately in this account. In fairness to the author, it should be stressed that he was evidently commissioned to compose the sort of tale he has in fact told—an “informal” history blending “selected” important information with lighter material in an account that a wide variety of readers would find palatable. This he has certainly done, and done well, by the usual standards of such work, and it would be churlish to criticize him for not writing another, more serious kind of historical study. The Foundation, however, is not beyond criticism for soliciting this kind of scrutiny when it could have defined the need differently. Miracle or not, the NSF is one of this country’s most important instruments of self-government. As such, from time to time, it deserves and should encourage searching examination of its structure and function. Periodic check-ups of this sort are at least as valuable as a birthday greeting, however well deserved.

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Curricula and Political Conflict

Science Textbook Controversies and the Politics of Equal Time. DOROTHY NELKIN. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1977. xii, 174 pp. \$12.50.

Aristotle, Copernicus, Galileo, Lamarck, and Lysenko were all individuals whose scientific theories were branded acceptable or heretical according to ideological circumstances. Dorothy Nelkin has written a book that reminds us that examples of such politicization need not be drawn from another culture or another era. More than a century has passed since the publication of the *Origin of Species*, and 50 years have elapsed since Clarence Darrow defended Darwin’s views against a literal interpretation of the Bible in the famous trial of John Scopes. Nevertheless, the theory of evolution is still not universally accepted in this country. Evolution has come to be a *sine qua non* of modern science; yet public school teachers are not

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Arturo Cuomo



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Table of Contents Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time

1. Understanding the eBook Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time User Reviews and Ratings
 - Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time and Bestseller Lists

5. Accessing Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time Free and Paid eBooks
 - Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time Public Domain eBooks
 - Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time eBook Subscription Services
 - Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time Budget-Friendly Options
6. Navigating Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time Compatibility with Devices
 - Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Interactive Elements Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
8. Staying Engaged with Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Setting Reading Goals Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Science Textbook Controversies And The Politics Of Equal Time
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
13. Promoting Lifelong Learning

- Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
- Exploring Educational eBooks

14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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