

Save
from Alan Waterman

Attempts to justify the disruptive tactic of the sit-in at Stanford's AEL on grounds that more rational procedures have not been successful ignore the fact that a mechanism for orderly, rational action does exist at the university. The Research Policy Committee has been in existence for nearly three years, and it can hardly be accused of being ineffective when complaints expressed through the current sit-in have not even been brought before it.

This committee has been willing, indeed eager, to examine aspects of research about which questions have been raised. Its membership has included some who, three years ago, challenged the presence of "classified" research and who have diligently examined proposals for new and continuing research which have come before it (including all the university's "classified" contracts). Those programs which have been approved by this committee have been considered by them to be appropriate for a university environment. If someone disagrees with the bases on which this approval is granted, he is welcome to express his views before the committee, or its members individually; and if he has not done so, he should not complain about inaction.

On repeated occasions within the past year, the Stanford student body has voted, by more than two to one, to condemn sit-ins and to refuse to yield to any coercive tactics. Yet the group now occupying AEL ignores the expression of opinion, even when alternative methods are available.

The pertinent question is whether university research is to be controlled in a systematic way based on scrutiny of the pertinent facts, or whether it is to be controlled by an emotionally aroused group whose sensitivities and concerns are directed toward sweeping measures based on

incomplete understandings and oversimplified reasoning. In either case, what we are dealing with is censorship, in a literal sense, censorship of one segment of the university community by another segment. When such censorship is based on action which does not even attempt to give existing channels for rational procedure a try, it is deplorable. The only justifiable means for censoring university research at all is one which is carefully selective and discriminating. To eliminate research because it is legally "classified," or because it is sponsored by DOD, or because it might lead to military applications -- to employ any such blanket prohibitions would hinder as many progressive pursuits as "immoral" ones, and would be totally antithetical to the academic purpose.

If we do not keep some sensible balance in this matter, there is a very serious danger that intellectual progress will be seriously retarded. Do we really want our researchers to be so cautious that they dare not work on any project which some group might consider offensive? Should research be limited to only those subjects which are "safe?"

Whatever the criteria for Stanford's acceptance of research contracts, they must provide for intelligent, rational decisions rather than mass action. To take such action without even trying existing channels is not only inexcusable, it is detrimental to all research.

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