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### Editorial



Wednesday, March 29, 2017 \$1.00

### COMMENTARY

# Why the president is right to question research funds

By James E. Moore

President Trump's "America First" budget blueprint calls for eliminating about 20 independent agencies, and eliminating multiple agencies and programs across federal departments. While disquieting to many, and silent on the crucial matter of entitlement programs, the president's budget proposal still forces an overdue examination of the legitimate role of government.

All of the agencies and programs the president calls for eliminating serve constructive purposes. But are the purposes important enough to justify expropriating the taxpayer funds needed to support them? Even if the benefits of most of these programs exceed their costs, do these benefits exceed the benefits that would otherwise flow from leaving more taxpayer dollars with taxpayers?

Households and firms do only one of two things with their money. They spend it or they invest it, and both activities expand the economy.

Some of the agencies the president's budget eliminates are highly visible, such as the National Endowment for the Arts. Some are more obscure, such as the Corporation for National and Community Service. None of them, though, are engaged in activities so compelling that public authority necessarily should be reaching into the pockets of taxpayers to enable the work.

Proposing their elimination forces an examination of this question, and in many cases the right answer will be pull back from the activity.

The budget blueprint calls for a funding reduction of 18 percent for the National Institutes of Health, largely as a function of reorganization. Similar opportunities exist at the National Science Foundation. But the NSF is absent from the budget proposal, and universities across the country are anxious to know whether the NSF will be affected by the president's agenda.

This is because one of the ways universities measure quality is by the number of doctoral graduates each institution produces, on the sometimes fanci-



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Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin listens at right as President Trump speaks during a Feb. 22 meeting about the federal budget at the White House.

ful assumption that more doctoral graduates translates into more placements on faculties. Federal research funds are of central importance to doctoral programs, and reductions in funding would force a change in the way universities compete.

The NSF mostly supports research in basic science and engineering. Both NIH and NSF research funds are awarded in intensely competitive processes. The long-run economic benefits provided by the results these research projects generate very probably justify the tax burden necessary to achieve them.

If we could remove the past century of physical and natural science research results from our lives, the quality of our existence would be dramatically diminished.

However, there are elements of the NSF agenda that do not pass this test. The NSF's fiscal year budget request for 2017 was just under \$8 billion. The support requested for research in the social, behavioral and economic sciences is only a small portion of this, under \$300 million, but the most appropriate level is zero. If we could eliminate the last century of social science research results from our lives, it is hard to know what would change.

The NSF's request for Education and Human Resources accounts for just under \$1 bil-

lion. Most of these expenditures could cease with little or no impact on the quality or volume of scientific research done in the United States. They should.

The most important expenditures, such as support for graduate research fellowships, are a reasonably small share of this total, and if retained could be folded into the foundation's competitive research funding programs.

If half of the NSF's EHR budget was shifted to research, and the other half conserved, NSF research funding could still be expanded by 3 percent, even if social science research funding was completely eliminated. Total agency expenses would be reduced by over 9 percent, half the NIH benchmark.

Completely eliminating social science and EHR expenditures would reduce the NSF budget by over 15 percent, and the NSF could still fund just as much meaningful research as ever.

Many such reforms are possible, but this means more attention to priorities than we have paid in the past. The president and his budget advisors are on the right track.

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