

WEAPONS LABS, THE UNIVERSITY, AND THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSAL

by

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The decision of the Regents of the University of California to re-new contracts with the federal laboratories which develop the nation's nuclear weapons is full of complication. The prevailing opinion is based on the judgment that the arrangement is supported by "the national interest," as this is perceived today by the President and Congress of the United States. David Saxon, UC President, has said repeatedly that as-signing this task to the University is to place it in competent hands. Such is more reliable, he contends, than allowing some other segment of the industry to take it on, particularly those less highly trained, per-haps, who may be in more convenient position to exploit the situation for personal gain. Governor Brown, on the other hand, has wanted to sever the relationship. But, sensing the futility of this, he has proposed alterna-tively that the University establish a "peace institute" -- a Center for Global Security -- to be paid for, in part, by some of the revenue the University receives for running the federal labs. In his view, a univer-sity involved in the weapons business should also take deliberate steps to assess and propose conditions advancing the cause of international peace.

The fundamental question concerns the place accorded the national interest and the University's responsibility thereto. David Saxon, sup-ported by a majority of the Regents, believes that as long as the national

interest is understood to be served by the development of nuclear weaponry, the University is sanctioned to play whatever corroborative role is compatible with its fundamental intention. Governor Brown can mount a forceful appeal too, for, surely he is not alone in reckoning international peace to lie within the pursuit of the same basic interest.

And yet the issue for the Regents is whether it is in the best interests of the University to promote either aspiration on such terms. Arguments against nuclear-weapons support can be made more compelling and dramatic than arguments against world peace. But the deeper question is what the basic premise does to the character, moral fiber, integrity and independence of the University. Each is endangered if the work of the University becomes so directly subservient to "the national interest," no matter to what extent the principals find themselves in agreement with accepted or semi-official renditions of it.

These were the issues at stake too, though in miniscule form, in the recent controversy about the purpose of the Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. I had supposed that an intellectual center, privately funded while affiliated with the University of California, could remain free to pursue its chartered objectives, at least sufficiently so so sustain its identity as an advocate of human rights, civil liberties, personal freedoms, and social justice. I believe the outcome of the discussion is that agencies of the University can effect no roles which might qualify as political espousal, but must restrict their ambitions to academic pursuits such as the search for truth and scholarly rigor, making certain that all serious reflection on important issues be given a fair hearing.

All right, But if this is a matter of policy, on what basis can the Regents decide in favor of nuclear-weapons involvement? Isn't it a distinctively political reading of the situation that shelters this cause under the protections of "the national interest?" (Predictably Regent Glenn Campbell, head of the Hoover Institute, voted for the resolution; Stanley Sheinbaum, long-time advocate of civil-libertarian causes, abstained; the Governor registered his opposition. Each one, devoutly committed to the national interest, nevertheless voted his politics.) Or, if there is pretense that sponsorship of the nuclear labs does not enmesh the University politically, then why are human rights and personal freedoms (both constitutional rights), and, yes, even social justice, international peace and global security not protected in the same way?

The policy must be consistent. If the contract with the nuclear labs can be sustained, why not permit the alternative to occur too? Or, if the latter is difficult to create, shouldn't the former be subject to the same restriction?

Until the principle is clarified, politics and financial expediency will be the ruling factors. Under this combination, and more and more as defense budgets increase, the "national interest" will hold the University captive.