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FEDERATION OF AMERICAN SCIENTISTS

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July 8, 1949

Honorable Harry S. Truman
The President of the United States
The White House
Washington, D.C.

My dear Mr. President:

The current controversy over the Atomic Energy Commission has once again focused attention on the problem of security in relation to scientific discovery. We are deeply disturbed over the misconceptions which have been voiced recently on this subject, and the ill-considered measures which have been designed for the prevention of espionage directed at our atomic weapons. We fear that, in the heat of controversy, important values are being overlooked and may be carelessly sacrificed.

The dilemma of secrecy vs. long-range security has plagued us since the end of the war. The demonstration of the potency of science as a military adjunct, so dramatically and horrifyingly driven home at Hiroshima, has led to two almost universally accepted conclusions -- first, that intensive cultivation of science is essential to national security; second, since scientific knowledge, of certain kinds and in certain circumstances, may have great military significance there are advantages in withholding it from potential enemies. We are slowly becoming aware, as a nation, that ill-considered implementation of these two conclusions can lead to very serious conflicts. For the narrowest interpretation of military security demands that we reveal nothing that might conceivably be useful to a potential enemy, and that the information of possible military significance available to any individual scientist be kept at a minimum. On the other hand, the experience of science is that the withholding of knowledge, or the abridgment of freedom of thought, is a deadly contamination which very rapidly inhibits research. How are we to reconcile these two apparently conflicting requirements? How can we safeguard in existing knowledge what is essential to military security, without so debilitating science as to sacrifice the hope of obtaining additional knowledge?

You have yourself, Mr. President, pointed out the importance of scientific progress to the national welfare, and the

grave danger to science of the continuance of an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. For five years we have been trying to balance the legitimate security needs of the nation against the equally insistent needs of free scientific inquiry. Largely this has been done by improvisation in individual instances with little attempt to develop or follow a comprehensive national policy. Security decisions have been left to individual government agencies, often subject to various uninformed pressures. Without benefit of full discussion of the issues, public understanding has remained at a low level and, in consequence, public opinion has drifted perilously close to hysterical insistence upon secrecy at whatever cost. The situation has become so threatening, not only to scientific progress but to traditional American political freedom, that we feel that only through action on your part can the problem be brought under control, analyzed, and solved for the best interests of all.

Therefore, we respectfully urge that you appoint, at your earliest convenience, a Special Commission on Science and National Security. We urge that this Commission be composed of foremost scientists and educators, outstanding men of public affairs, and representatives of Congress, the National Military Establishment, and the Executive Branch. We urge that this Commission make a full investigation of the entire problem of security requirements in relation to the requirements for maximum development of science. We believe that the Commission should study, among others, the following questions:

1. What are the limits where excessive attempts at secrecy diminish instead of preserve our national security?

2. What are the areas of science to which security measures can and should be applied?

3. What classification procedures give maximum protection of information of military value with minimum restriction of exchange of information of purely scientific value?

4. To what extent, and under what conditions, should classified research be conducted outside of military laboratories?

5. What types of clearance procedures are effective, and admissible within the bounds of scientific and democratic tradition, in military laboratories, in non-military governmental laboratories, in non-governmental laboratories?

6. What would be the effect on the morale of scientists and on our total scientific program of applying political tests for participation in non-secret scientific work through requirement of (1) oaths and affidavits, or (2) investigation and clearance?

7. What have been the effects of present security measures and procedures on our scientific research programs, particularly in government?

We believe that the Commission should study these matters not only with the objective of reporting to you its conclusions and recommendations, but with the thought as well of providing a factual background on security procedures now in use, specific studies of the effects and effectiveness of these procedures, ways in which similar problems are handled in other countries, etc. We have been too long security - conscious with insufficient security education.

American scientists differ in no way from their fellow - citizens in their desire to protect the best interests of their country. They seek no special dispensations or privileges. In opposing extreme advocates of military security they are really seeking not less security, but more of it. For our real strength lies not in the guarded knowledge of the moment, but in our ability to keep in the forefront of advancing knowledge. We recognize that the issue of security vs. freedom of science is one of public policy and that opinions other than those of scientists must enter into its resolution. It is for this reason, and because we are convinced that the matter is of urgent importance, that we ask for the establishment now of a Special Presidential Commission of broad representation and scope.

The individuals whose names appear on the accompanying list concur in our request for a commission along the lines suggested in this letter.

Respectfully yours,

Hugh C. Wolfe, Chairman
Gerhart Friedlander
Clifford Grobstein
M. Stanley Livingston
Philip Morrison
Arthur Roberts
R. Rollefson

Members of the Administrative Committee