

Conflict of Interests

Many scientists have been doing well in the constellation of industries that has grown up around the government defense programs, and congressional investigations and a presidential memorandum have ensued to guard against conflicts of interests. It appears that public image of the saintly scientist is in for a shock. Scientists have been consulting with the government and at the same time deriving large profits from non-governmental business connections related to their government work.

We are not partial to agitation about conflict of interest. If we bar from civic life everyone with a presumed conflict of interests, there will be nobody but morons to help career men run the vast and complicated modern state. This would be merely a contemporary version of the ancient history of democracies destroying themselves; social segments cloaking themselves as The People, eliminate other segments for varied and inconsistent reasons. Should parents of children not vote on school appropriations, nor Jews be involved on questions affecting Israel, nor businessmen on economic regulations, nor neurotics on mental health appropriations, nor Protestants on Catholic questions or for that matter Catholics on Catholic questions? In a basic psychological sense, only an apathetic man comes to be called disinterested under the terms of much of the agitation, but that is because he is really uninterested. Behind every interested and disinterested person lurks the possibility of corrupt interest, which is to say everywhere in the world.

Of course, we would not tolerate a man's being judge of his own cause, a situation occasionally arising when a social or natural scientist helps the government award contracts to himself in a non-governmental capacity. But it is fruitless and dangerous to push the definition of conflict of interests too far. Enough it is that a scientist makes known his related interests and anyhow not be given sole authority to make awards. Enough, that is, if our educational system teaches harder, and further into college, about the ethical principles that are useful to our specialized, impersonal society. Thereafter, every man should be deemed to be public-spirited until he exhibits a contrary character.

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