

Making Voters of Universities

THE United States Senate has done as much as any legislative body can to endear itself to academics. It remains to be seen whether it will be able to persuade other politicians in the United States, and especially the Administration, that the time has come to be generous once again to colleges and universities in the United States. Two weeks ago, more or less with acclamation, the Senate passed the draft of a piece of legislation intended to replace the Higher Education Act of 1965, and which would have the effect, for the first time, of making attendance at an American university into an assurance of a maintenance grant, at least for students whose parents are not too well off. But as well as helping needy students, the proposed legislation would help needy universities and colleges—those on the institutional breadline would be helped not merely with matching grants to accompany the student grant but also with special awards in times of trouble (see *Nature*, **232**, 518; 1971).

By backing this bill, the Senate has done three important things. First, for the first time, it has declared that higher education in the United States is something which the federal government must worry about. So far, apart from some of President Johnson's devices for helping universities in need by providing funds for libraries and other special facilities, the operations of the National Science Foundation and the other research bodies which for practical purposes support graduate education but only fitfully, and the scheme for guaranteed student loans introduced a year ago and still too new to be assessed, the United States Administration has traditionally taken the view that good colleges and universities will be able to swim and the others deservedly to sink. It will be interesting whether the Administration, Republican as it turns out, will accept an argument that has failed in previous Congresses to enchant its predecessors.

The Senate has also affronted a great many of those who believe that higher education, like the operation of supermarkets, should find its own level by proposing that a large amount of money should be spent on subsidies. On present estimates, the new higher education bill, if it ever becomes law by the summer of 1973 (when the present Act runs out), would provide \$18,000 million over three years. Many of those who have accepted the principle that higher education should properly be a charge on the federal government have found their hands rising in horror at the prospect that the rate of public expenditure on universities and colleges should rise to such a point that it exceeds even the spending of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and other similar agencies. But, of course, this is only one side of the coin. The better half of the case is with those who argue that if a government such as that of the United States can spend \$5,000 million (at the peak in 1968) on getting to the Moon and related activities, surely it can find a comparable amount to ensure the intellectual future of American society and industry.

That, of course, is the rhetoric. The interest of what the Senate has done, so soon after a period in which universities of all kinds and research academics in particular have been acutely short of funds, is that it presents

the Administration with an important political challenge. A year from now, when the Senate's bill should have found its way through yet another round of committees and should have struck a response from the House of Representatives as well (where similar ideas are waiting in the wings), President Nixon will be up to his neck in the election that will decide whether or not he will spend a second term at the White House. Although there is no strong tradition, in the United States or anywhere else, that higher education can become a political issue, next year may provide an exception. After all, the past few years have done very little to heal the breach between the present Administration and the universities which was created as much by brashness and bad manners as by malevolence in the early days of Mr Nixon's Administration. It is improbable that Mr Nixon will now willingly take the risk of giving offence in the universities even if he manages to return from Peking next spring with quite unexpected political triumphs. In all the circumstances, this may be an occasion when the Administration finds it prudent to let the Senate have its present bill.

100 Years Ago



PARIS

Académie des Sciences, August 21.—M. Faye in the chair.—M. Chabris has calculated the quantity of nitrate of ammonia yearly carried down to the soil for the nutrition of plants by means of the rain to be two pounds of nitric acid, and consequently, three pounds of nitrate of ammonia per acre.—M. Dumas contributed to the Academy a piece of bread, the provision for the army, which had been infected by *Oidium aurantiacum*. Such facts are not exceptional, principally in very hot weather, and may be detrimental to the public health, as the fungus spreads very rapidly, and it is very difficult to get rid of it. A special committee has been appointed to prevent the infection if possible. MM. Dumas, Baron Larey, Tulasne the botanist, and Pasteur, the celebrated author of so many works on spontaneous generation, are members.—M. Berthelot has examined most carefully a piece of carbon from the Cranbourne meteorite, an Australian stone, and shows by many scientific arguments that the Cranbourne carbon is quite unlike the Orgueil meteorite carbon (a French specimen). The Cranbourne carbon must have been acted upon by a high temperature in ultra-terrestrial space, and no trace of organic origin is to be found on it.—M. W. de Fonvielle sent through M. Leverrier a note establishing that meteoric phenomena analogous to the Marseilles phenomenon are not exceptional cases.—M. Bert, the former Prefect of Lille during the war, described some most interesting experiments on the effects of pressure in suffocating animals living in a confined space. The rapidity of death is not the same for every kind of animal. If the pressure is very high the death is not due to any mechanical effect or to the want of oxygen, but to the presence of carbonic acid, resulting from respiration. It is poisoned by the produce of its own lungs.—The Academy held a secret committee for the nomination of a free member. The list of candidates long delayed was at last published, and M. Belgrand is at the head. But the nomination will be contested.

From *Nature*, **4**, 380, September 7, 1871