Senator Fred Harris’s National Social Science Foundation Proposal

Reconsidering Federal Science Policy, Natural Science–Social Science Relations, and American Liberalism during the 1960s

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ABSTRACT

During the 1960s, a growing contingent of left-leaning voices claimed that the social sciences suffered mistreatment and undue constraints within the natural science–dominated federal science establishment. According to these critics, the entrenched scientific pecking order in Washington had an unreasonable commitment to the unity of the sciences, which reinforced unacceptable inequalities between the social and the natural sciences. The most important political figure who advanced this critique, together with a substantial legislative proposal for reform, was the Oklahoma Democratic Senator Fred Harris. Yet histories of science and social science have told us surprisingly little about Harris. Moreover, existing accounts of his effort to create a National Social Science Foundation have misunderstood crucial features of this story. This essay argues that Harris’s NSSF proposal developed into a robust, historically unique, and increasingly

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It is a great pleasure to thank those who provided feedback on earlier versions of this essay: Howard Brick, Hamilton Cravens, Philippe Fontaine, Yves Gingras, Joel Isaac, Daniel Kleinman, Jefferson Pooley, Joy Rohde, Timothy Stanley, Marga Vicedo, Jessica Wang, and two anonymous referees. I also benefited from audience feedback following presentations for the History of Science Society, the Interuniversity Research Center on Science and Technology (CIRST) at the University of Montreal in Quebec, the Organization of American Historians, the University of Toronto Graduate History Symposium, the University of Toronto Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, the York University History and Theory of Psychology Program, the York University Science and Technology Studies Program, and the Workshop on History of Economics as History of Science at ENS Cachan et Institut Universitaire de France, Paris. The following provided valuable financial support for research and related expenses: Arizona State University West, Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives at the University of Oklahoma–Norman, Dirksen Congressional Center in Pekin, Illinois, National Science Foundation Sponsored Project Award 9810635, Harvard University’s Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, and the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR). The staff members at the Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives, the U.S. National Archives, and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences Archives deserve thanks for facilitating my archival research.

Isis, 2012, 103:54–82
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0021-1753/2012/10301-0003$10.00
critical liberal challenge to the post–World War II federal science establishment’s treatment of the social sciences as “second-class citizens.”

I strongly believe we must turn our attention toward the social sciences in a way we have not done before. Existing federal support has only scratched the surface. No voice speaks on behalf of the social sciences, as there is a voice for the natural sciences. —Senator Fred Harris

IN THE MID 1960S, the Democratic senator from Oklahoma, Fred R. Harris, introduced a bill to create a National Social Science Foundation (NSSF). In 1967, as the chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Government Research, Harris presided over national hearings on his bill. According to Harris and the bill’s political, social science, and other scholarly supporters, the proposed agency would make major improvements in the funding, status, representation, and influence of social science within the federal science establishment. In addition, such improvements would strengthen social science as an academic enterprise and, just as important, broaden social scientists’ ability to address urgent domestic and foreign policy problems. But the stars failed to align properly. By the decade’s end, Harris’s attempt to provide social scientists with their own agency had failed.

Commentary on this episode from historians of science has been minimal, though sociologists have devoted some attention to it. In his insider’s account of social science funding and programs at the National Science Foundation (NSF), former NSF staff member Otto Larsen notes that Harris’s proposal stimulated political and scholarly discussion on important issues, including the strained relationships between the social and natural sciences as well as limitations in federal mechanisms for supporting the social sciences. But after a brief discussion Larsen suggests that Harris’s proposal has little historical importance because a competing legislative proposal was passed in the summer of 1968. The successful proposal, developed in the House of Representatives by Connecticut Democrat Emilio Daddario, altered NSF’s charter and gave the agency an explicit mandate to support the social sciences, including applied social research. According to Larsen, the so-called Daddario amendment made Harris’s NSSF proposal redundant.2

In a more recent analysis, the sociologist of science Thomas Gieryn shows that participants in the NSSF debate engaged in elaborate “boundary work.” Using various rhetorical strategies, social scientists, congressmen, natural scientists, and various other figures from the worlds of academia, government, and private research either situated the social sciences alongside the natural sciences in a unified scientific enterprise or placed the social and natural sciences in separate spheres of inquiry. Yet Gieryn, much like Larsen, indicates that the Daddario amendment rendered Harris’s proposal redundant. Furthermore, he claims that social scientists never provided much support for Harris’s proposal. He says that after realizing that social scientists weren’t strongly supportive, Harris quickly abandoned the project. And he concludes that the failure of Harris’s NSSF


proposal hardly mattered because there was a happy ending. Specifically, Gieryn alleges that during the early years of the Reagan administration, the Daddario amendment proved valuable because it enabled the agency to defend the social sciences against sharp attacks from conservative critics. As Gieryn puts it: “all’s well that ends well.”3

In sum, existing accounts indicate that Harris’s proposal provided the occasion for debating some important questions but has rather limited historical significance. Here, I present a reconsideration of this episode and its wider importance for the interconnected histories of the social sciences, the relations of the social sciences and the natural sciences, federal science policy, and American liberalism since World War II.

My starting point is the observation that the rise and fall of Harris’s proposal took place at a crucial moment in these interconnected histories. In the past couple decades, historians of science have produced a rich body of literature examining developments from World War II through the early Cold War decades that shaped the enormous expansion in American science and established much tighter links between the scientific and political spheres.4 Most accounts dealing with the social sciences focus on the institutions, scholars, and research supported by military and intelligence agencies and by the large private foundations, including the Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller philanthropies. In the mid to late 1960s, the military–intelligence–social science complex became a major target of critical scrutiny both inside and outside the ivory tower, mainly from concerned liberals and more radical voices.5 Though not so well known, another important part of this larger


story about social science funding, expansion, and public controversy concerns civilian agencies. Furthermore, as we will see through the story of Harris’s NSSF proposal, the development of military patronage and the development of civilian patronage were often intertwined, as were mounting leftist criticisms of these two sources of funding in the 1960s. A liberal Democrat with broad intellectual interests, Senator Harris paid close attention to these criticisms. He first developed his NSSF proposal as an alternative to military funding. But before long he also presented this proposal as an alternative to funding from the civilian NSF—an important point, because ever since the early Cold War years the NSF was among the civilian agencies of greatest concern to academic social scientists. Furthermore, by the early to mid 1960s the NSF provided a focal point for growing tensions between the natural and social sciences within the federal science establishment.6

My central argument is that Harris’s NSSF initiative developed into a robust, historically unique, and increasingly critical liberal challenge to the post–World War II federal science establishment’s treatment of the social sciences as “second-class citizens.” From the 1930s through the 1960s, liberal politicians and intellectuals generally provided the strongest support for public social science funding. They also had great hope in the ability of social scientists to further a wide array of political, economic, and social goals. During the 1960s, however, a growing contingent of left-leaning social scientists, intellectuals, and politicians became increasingly worried that the social sciences suffered mistreatment and undue constraints within the natural science–dominated federal science establishment, on its military and civilian sides. These critics, who had much in common with the wider chorus of liberal and more radical voices associated with the New Left, charged that the entrenched scientific pecking order in Washington inhibited the development of valuable humanistic and critical forms of social science inquiry.7 In this context, the most

6 Because the NSF had a mandate to promote the advancement of basic science, and because the agency’s leaders emphasized its commitment to funding work of the highest scientific caliber, social scientists understood that the development of the agency’s social science programs had special importance. In addition to the works by Larsen and Gieryn cited above, see Daniel Kleinman and Mark Solovey, “Hot Science/Cold War: The National Science Foundation after World War II,” Radical History Review, 1995, 63:110–139, esp. 118–124; Solovey, “Riding Natural Scientists’ Coattails onto the Endless Frontier: The SSRC and the Quest for Scientific Legitimacy,” Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences, 2004, 40:393–422; and Solovey and Jefferson Pooley, “The Price of Success: Sociologist Harry Alpert, the NSF’s First Social Science Policy Architect,” Annals of Science, 2011, 68:229–260. Some other civilian agencies provided important funding for research related to their specific areas of policy concern. See, e.g., Wade E. Pickren and S. F. Schneider, eds., Psychology and the National Institute of Mental Health: A Historical Analysis of Science, Practice, and Policy (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Books, 2005).

important political figure who advanced this leftish critique and developed a substantial proposal for reform was Senator Harris. Yet existing histories of science and social science have told us little about Harris. Most surprising, we know very little about his role in the rise and fall of the NSSF proposal.8

This essay begins by exploring how Harris’s interest in the social sciences was shaped by developments in his life, from his childhood experiences during the Great Depression to his early political career in the Democratic Party. Next, I consider how the context of 1960s liberal reform combined with controversies over military and civilian funding to inspire Harris’s initial policy engagements with the social sciences. This leads to an examination of his role as chairman of the new Senate Subcommittee on Government Research and how he used this position to develop and promote his NSSF proposal. Contrary to received wisdom, I argue that Harris’s proposal had some significant support from social scientists, especially from individual scholars and leaders of professional scholarly organizations who believed, as he did, that the position of the social sciences within the natural science–dominated federal science establishment created problems on a number of levels. I then consider how increasingly strained relations between the social sciences and American liberalism during the late 1960s became pertinent to Harris’s evolving political career and his NSSF initiative. As the Oklahoma senator’s politics and ideas shifted leftward in the final years of the decade, his criticisms of the federal science establishment’s handling of the social sciences acquired a sharper edge. His vision for a new social science agency expanded in tandem: the mature case supporting his NSSF proposal called for much more extensive reforms in the funding, status, representation, influence, and anticipated social implications of the social sciences within the federal government than Daddario’s proposal. Moreover, in ways not recognized by existing historical accounts, increasing tensions between the social sciences and American liberalism, plus Harris’s own political and intellectual development, contributed to the demise of his NSSF proposal. Finally, I will reconsider how these new insights about this path not taken should inform our histories.

FROM SHARECROPPER’S SON TO SENATOR FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE

The son of a sharecropper in southwestern Oklahoma, Fred Harris (b. 1930) grew up in poverty during the Great Depression. At age five he went to the fields, where he developed the habit of hard work and persistence. Throughout his grade-school years he held a variety of labor-intensive jobs: “baling hay, mowing lawns, shining shoes, delivering papers, sweeping out stores, and following the wheat harvest all the way to North Dakota nine summers in a row.” On the academic side, he developed a love for reading, a sharp memory, and a flair for public speaking. After earning a college degree at the University of Oklahoma, where he majored in government and history, Harris studied at the university’s College of Law and became managing editor of its law review. In 1954 he graduated


at the top of his class, with the highest cumulative grade point average in the college’s history. By that point he had married LaDonna Crawford, who was part Comanche.9

Following his studies, Harris established his own law firm and went into Democratic Party politics. At the minimum age of twenty-five he was elected to the Oklahoma State Senate, where he served for eight years. In 1964, after a U.S. senator from Oklahoma died in office, Harris threw his hat into the ring for the upcoming special election. Despite tough competition from the Republican candidate, a popular Oklahoma football coach who had won three national championships, Harris prevailed. Victory sent him to the nation’s capital for a special two-year term. Still only thirty-four years old, he was the second youngest member of the U.S. Senate.10

From his Washington base, Harris set out to improve the lives of the poor and disadvantaged. During his first congressional session he sponsored legislation that created the Ozarka Regional Development Commission, charged with improving economic growth in depressed eastern Oklahoma. Encouraged by his wife, Harris worked hard to improve public programs dealing with Native Americans and their many hardships. A few years later, following the summer race riots in 1967, Harris and fellow Democratic senator Walter Mondale suggested the establishment of a Special Commission on Civil Strife. Soon thereafter, President Johnson appointed Harris to the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, the so-called Kerner Commission, named after its chairman, Illinois governor Otto Kerner. This important appointment inspired Harris to investigate and speak out about continued racial discrimination and other difficulties facing the nation’s black Americans.11

An omnivorous reader of books and popular science magazines, Harris also established himself as a science policy expert. As a member of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, chaired by conservative Arkansas Democrat John L. McClellan, Harris identified a major gap in legislative attention to science policy. At Harris’s suggestion, McClellan created a Subcommittee on Government Research, with Harris as its chairman. Now dubbed the “Senator for Science,” Harris became responsible for investigating federal support for scientific research and developing a more coherent national research policy. Not often did a first-term Senate member obtain such an important position.12

Harris’s entry into the national science policy arena took place at a critical moment in the relationship between social science and American liberalism. During the first half of the 1960s, the public visibility and influence of the social sciences soared, as scholars from these disciplines worked on a wide array of initiatives advanced by the liberal Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Both presidents took a special interest in social scientists and other “action intellectuals” who built bridges between the theoretical and the practical, between scholarly research and social reform. In the foreign policy arena, modernization experts from various disciplines concentrated on the problems of “development” in so-called underdeveloped or Third World countries. Within the defense establishment, operations researchers, systems analysts, and game theorists employed cutting-edge tools to improve the efficiency and strategic capabilities of U.S. military operations around the world, including the battle against Communist-assisted insurgencies

9 Harris, Alarms and Hopes, p. 4.
10 Lowitt, Fred Harris, pp. 1–6.
in Southeast Asia. On the home front, sociologists, economists, and scholars in nearby disciplines contributed to the nation’s blossoming reform agenda, tackling such problems as juvenile delinquency, slow economic growth, and the persistence of widespread poverty in the midst of plenty.13

Presumably, this impressive movement of social scientists into the national spotlight would stimulate major increases in public funding for their work. But as the controversies over military and civilian funding discussed in the next section revealed, substantial confusion about how to proceed arose. The first three decades of Harris’s life had instilled in him a warm feeling for the underdog, a deep appreciation for academic studies and historical understanding, and a strong belief that scholarly knowledge should inform liberal politics in beneficial ways, to improve the nation, the world, and especially the plight of the disadvantaged. These aspects of Harris’s early biography would shape how he thought about the social sciences and their position within the federal science establishment.

CONTROVERSIES OVER MILITARY AND CIVILIAN FUNDING

Harris’s interest in the social sciences intersected with two lines of controversy in the mid 1960s. The first concerned military funding and erupted following the exposure of Project Camelot, an army-sponsored study of the revolutionary process. Camelot’s official goals involved the development of a social systems model to understand and predict the course of revolutions and, equally important, to help create counter-revolutionary measures. With an anticipated cost of $4–$6 million, Camelot may have been the most expensive social science project in American history. One participant expected that Camelot would become the social scientists’ Manhattan Project. But in the middle of 1965, a combination of international controversy and national criticism about Camelot’s ideological and political significance led to its cancellation.14

The ensuing political and scholarly debate examined whether social scientists had become unduly dependent on military funding. According to critics, extensive military funding in recent years threatened to undermine the common (though contested) claim that social science was or at least should be insulated from political and ideological pressures. In the case of Project Camelot and counterinsurgency research more generally, social scientists seemed to be engaged in furthering U.S. Cold War interests, rather than acting as ideologically neutral and objective scholars. Furthermore, the functionalist logic and


systems framework that suffused Camelot’s planning documents suggested that the project supported a counter-revolutionary viewpoint, thereby blurring the boundary between social science and social ideology and making the distinction between social scientist and political agent hard to draw. In December 1965 a congressional report presented Camelot in a favorable light, as an outstanding example of the behavioral sciences’ contribution to the American military arsenal. Yet even this favorable report recognized that social science dependence on military patronage might cause harm, as an analysis from the previous year had suggested. The report thus recommended that the nation strengthen its civilian mechanisms of support. These concerns about military funding for social science soon aroused Senator Harris’s concern.

In early 1966 Harris spoke on the Senate floor about another military research study called Project Simpatico. Led by two psychologists, Howard K. Kaufman and Norman D. Smith, and conducted by the army-funded Special Operations Research Office located at American University in Washington, D.C., Simpatico focused on the effectiveness of Colombian military programs in improving rural conditions, in such areas as medical care, water supply, and road construction. To evaluate effectiveness, Simpatico’s researchers would examine how these military programs influenced people’s attitudes toward development projects and also toward the government and military as agents of development. This study satisfied a new set of federal review procedures created in Camelot’s aftermath and received approval from the host Colombian government. Nevertheless, Harris pointed out that critics in South America claimed that Simpatico supported American imperialism, thus fueling a growing fear among Latin Americans that the Pentagon dominated U.S. policies in their region.

Shortly thereafter, Harris’s subcommittee launched an investigation into the funding of social research on foreign areas. As reported in major print media from the *Washington Post* to *Science* magazine, Harris also planned to investigate the CIA’s role in supporting such research, including a large program at Michigan State University to develop technical assistance for the American-backed South Vietnamese government.

In public hearings that summer and in correspondence with various scholars, Harris’s subcommittee learned that questions governing federal funding for research on foreign areas had implications for broader questions about federal social science support. The anthropologist Stephen Boggs proposed, for example, that support for basic social research should not be associated with “applied research, or research of operational significance.” Harris himself spoke of the need to “civilianize” social research. And Harris’s staff director Steven Ebbin, a political scientist who had worked in the State Department, declared in a worried tone that “something must be done, either legislatively or administratively, to re-orient our approach to federal support of the social sciences.”

Already one possible path to reform had emerged from a second and initially separate

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18 Stephen Boggs to Steve Ebbin, 1 June 1966, Box 30, Folder 11, Fred R. Harris Papers, Carl Albert Congressional Research and Studies Center, Univ. Oklahoma, Norman (hereafter cited as *Harris Papers*); U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Government Operations, Subcommittee on Government Research, *Federal Support of International Social Science and Behavioral Research, Hearings*, 89th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington,
controversy about civilian funding from the NSF that, as discussed below, would soon attract Harris’s attention. Emilio Daddario, the Connecticut Democratic Representative and chairman of the House Subcommittee on Science, Research, and Development, had been studying how to make publicly supported science more relevant to national concerns. Daddario’s interest in this issue reflected a widespread sentiment among political, military, and industrial leaders that public funding for science should concentrate more on applied issues than had been the case. With this goal in mind, Daddario proposed an amendment to the NSF’s charter that would give the agency a mandate to support applied research; the original 1950 charter mandated support for basic research only. Though his amendment did not focus on the social sciences, Daddario noted that NSF support for applied research could contribute to the “development of solutions for the problems of society.” To clarify the agency’s role here, Daddario also proposed amending the charter to mention the social sciences explicitly, which its wording up until that time had not done.19

However, hearings held by Daddario’s subcommittee revealed significant differences of opinion about the nature and uses of the social sciences, as well as with regard to their public support. Representing a skeptical position common among the nation’s natural science elite was the chemist and explosives expert Donald F. Hornig. The head of both the President’s Science Advisory Committee (PSAC) and the federal Office of Science and Technology (OST), Hornig noted that the NSF already supported some social science. Typically, such work focused on the “experimental end of the spectrum . . . mostly experimental psychology, for example, rather than social psychology.” But the agency had “not, as a matter of fact, regarded the social sciences as the central part” of its mission. Hornig added that he personally was “not sure” if the agency “should take on additional responsibilities in this field, particularly in areas involving policy,” as Daddario suggested.20

Representing a supportive position prevalent among liberal politicians, California Democratic Representative George Brown said he found Hornig’s caution worrisome because it failed to recognize that the most important national issues of the day concerned matters such as social pathology and criminology—all topics addressed by the social sciences. Hornig’s statements also implied that the “natural sciences are the sciences,” a viewpoint Brown found worrisome and all too common among natural scientists who had become accustomed to bountiful public support ever since World War II, while the social sciences suffered from relative neglect.21

Speaking as the president of the U.S. Social Science Research Council (SSRC), Pendleton Herring supported Brown’s view by noting that NSF’s natural science orientation created problems for the social sciences. Besides holding the position of SSRC president since 1948, Herring had participated in the development of NSF’s social science

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21 Ibid., p. 123.
efforts as an external advisor. He knew as much as anybody about the political pressures, institutional conditions, and philosophical assumptions that shaped federal policies and programs for the social sciences. “Very often,” he explained to Congress, those responsible for NSF’s social science efforts had to consider what if anything would “be an equivalent” to work in the natural sciences. So one started out thinking “in the language, let’s say, of physics” and then tried to find “some counterpart . . . in the field of sociology, leading to an unfortunate “sort of twisting things to meet a pattern.”22

These charges about NSF’s scientific pecking order worried Senator Harris’s subcommittee as well. Summing up the problem, staff director Steven Ebbin observed that at the NSF one found “a long-standing antipathy and resistance . . . toward supporting the social sciences,” and “particularly so” in fields useful in the public policy arena, including “political science, . . . international relations and public administration.” Searching for a better channel for civilian funding, Ebbin suggested a new social science agency.23

The idea of creating such an agency first arose in the mid to late 1940s, during the national science policy debate preceding NSF’s founding. But in those years the nation’s political, business, military, scientific, and educational leaders concentrated mainly on taking care of the natural sciences, whose breathtaking wartime contributions created the basis for a dramatically expanded post–World War II national science establishment. Moreover, that earlier NSF debate had revealed substantial suspicion, especially in conservative political and scientific circles, about the political valence and scientific status of social science. Social scientists had enjoyed some strong words of support from political liberals, but the course of the postwar NSF debate proved unfavorable to them, leading Congress to use the vague phrase “other sciences” rather than “social sciences” in the agency’s charter and stimulating little interest in a separate social science agency.24 But the mid 1960s presented a golden opportunity for reviving that idea.

If the nation created a social science agency with initial support between $40 and $50 million, social scientists would have a real alternative to funding from operating agencies including the Defense Department and the CIA, noted Ebbin with enthusiasm. Moreover, a new agency could help undermine natural science oversight of the social sciences, which to that point was normal practice within the NSF and the federal science establishment more widely.25 Senator Harris agreed. Following the 1966 hearings, he thus put forth a legislative proposal to give the social sciences an agency of their own.

THE CHALLENGE

While establishing himself as a national science policy expert, Harris also developed close ties with the major liberal leaders in the Democratic Party. He and his wife became friends with Senator Robert Kennedy, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, President Lyndon Johnson, and their wives. Harris, notes his biographer, “appeared to be destiny’s child, guided by powerful mentors, fated to enjoy a role of great power and influence.” Harris’s NSSF proposal reflected his larger ambitions: he aimed to strengthen the social sciences and their ability to contribute to the expansive liberal agenda of those years. The eminent

22 Ibid., p. 443.
23 Ebbin to Harris, 14 June 1966, Harris Papers.
25 Ebbin to Harris, 14 June 1966, Harris Papers.
U.S. historian Henry Steele Commager predicted that just as another liberal Democratic senator with a fervent dedication to higher education named J. William Fulbright would forever be associated with the well-known Fulbright Program, established two decades earlier to support international scholarly exchanges, Senator Harris would assure his own niche in history as the NSSF’s main architect.  

In the fall of 1966, Harris introduced a Senate bill to establish a National Social Science Foundation (S. 836), while a companion bill went to the House Committee on Education and Labor. After being reported to the Committee on Government Operations, the Senate bill went to Harris’s subcommittee for consideration. No action was taken, and Harris reintroduced his bill in February 1967. The same month his subcommittee held three days of hearings on it. During June and July these hearings continued for nine more days.

The Senate bill had a healthy complement of cosponsors, twenty in all, including a slew of prominent liberals, among them Fulbright, Humphrey, Edward Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Mike Mansfield, Eugene McCarthy, George McGovern, Walter Mondale, and Gaylord Nelson. Many of these cosponsors, including the vice president, were committed to using social science expertise to solve the nation’s problems. As Harris noted with approval, when Humphrey served as a Democratic senator from Minnesota he had proposed that the social sciences needed their own “Magna Carta.” Liberal politicians such as Humphrey, Harris, and Mondale believed that the social sciences needed something akin to greater rights and freedoms than they had within the federal science system up until that point; otherwise, they would not develop as mature scientific citizens, capable of making maximal contributions to the nation’s intellectual and political affairs.  

In terms of governing structure and basic responsibilities, the proposed NSSF resembled the existing NSF. The NSSF’s main responsibilities would focus on developing a national policy to support the social sciences and sponsoring social science research and scholarship. Also following the NSF model, the agency would have a board of trustees consisting of twenty-four members, a director, and a deputy director, all positions appointed by the U.S. president with the Senate’s advice and consent. First-year appropriations would be capped at $20 million. But like his staff director, Harris anticipated that much larger appropriations would follow.

With the controversy over funding from military and intelligence agencies raging, Harris wanted to ensure that the proposed agency would not compromise the intellectual independence of the social sciences. Specifically, he argued that scholars should not have to design their studies in response to the practical interests of those who controlled the purse strings. Harris’s bill thus specified that the nation would be best served in the long run by a “free and independent academic community.” Other passages said that all agency-sponsored research would be made “freely available to the public” and not subject to any security restrictions.

The range of policy issues worrying Harris was also starting to expand as he criticized

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26 Lowitt, Fred Harris, p. x; and Henry Steele Commager to Harris, 8 Mar. 1967, Box 84, Folder 1, Harris Papers.


28 Harris’s “National Foundation for the Social Sciences” mentioned Humphrey’s statement. Before becoming a politician, Humphrey seriously considered pursuing doctoral studies, with the aim of becoming a political science professor. Mondale’s interest in the social sciences is noted later in this essay, in connection with his sponsorship of a bill to create a U.S. Council of Social Advisers.

29 S. 836.

30 Ibid.
NSF’s narrow approach to social science. As the testimony to Daddario’s subcommittee from Representative Brown, SSRC President Pendleton Herring, and PSAC chairman Donald Hornig all hinted at, the first two post–World War II decades had bolstered the fortunes of what NSF documents regularly referred to as research at the “hard-core” end of the social research continuum. In the early 1950s Harry Alpert, a sociologist hired to oversee the early development of the agency’s social science activities, first advanced the policy of limiting funding to the “hard core.” This phrase referred to social research that had much in common with natural science research—or at least much in common with certain ideals commonly associated with the natural sciences. Slowly during the 1950s, and then more rapidly in the early 1960s, NSF support for social science increased. At the same time, the organizational standing of its social science efforts rose from an “office” to a “program” and then to a “division.” But the agency’s hard-core emphasis remained.31

For those involved in social science policy making during the 1950s and early 1960s, the notion that different types of social research lay along a continuum, with hard-core social science at one end, had great appeal. Hard-core social research typically implied, among other things, an emphasis on precise quantitative methodologies (rather than fuzzy qualitative reasoning), the testing of limited, middle-range hypotheses (as opposed to uncontrolled speculative theorizing on the one hand and mindless fact gathering on the other), the acceptance of a value-neutral, apolitical, and nonideological investigative stance (instead of a normative, political, or ideological orientation), and the assumption that science and politics were in principle very different types of activities.32

Though the NSF became an important patron of the hard-core approach, this approach became dominant throughout the federal science establishment. It was embraced by military science agencies (including the Research and Development Board and later the Defense Science Board, as well as the separate science agencies and programs of the air force, navy, and army), the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the OST, and the PSAC. At all of these sites common wisdom held that the only forms of social research worthy of the name “science” were those that closely resembled work in the natural sciences. This generalization does not imply that everybody had the same understanding of the natural sciences. Nevertheless, practically nobody with influence at these major federal science sites questioned the general idea that a great deal of social science was immature compared to research in the natural sciences, especially the physical sciences. The rising popularity of the term “behavioral sciences” and the gathering momentum of the behavioral sciences movement during the 1950s and 1960s became closely associated with—though not identical with or reducible to—the hard-core approach. When in the early 1960s the NAS decided, after much debate, to open up its regular membership to areas in the social sciences beyond psychology and anthropology, it did so under the

31 On the early development of the NSF’s social science efforts see Kleinman and Solovey, “Hot Science/Cold War” (cit. n. 6), pp. 118–124.

32 The economist Joseph Willits used the term “hard-core” social research in the early 1950s, when he directed the Rockefeller Foundation’s Social Science Division. In a conversation with Alpert in 1954, Chester Barnard, formerly a member of the Rockefeller Foundation’s governing board and now a member of NSF’s governing board, recommended that the NSF itself focus on the hard core. Alpert then incorporated this term in his NSF policy studies and recommendations, after which point the agency regularly used it. However, in other contexts Barnard and Alpert recognized the value of various other “softer” forms of social science research. On Alpert’s views see Solovey and Pooley, “Price of Success” (cit. n. 6). On Barnard’s views see his short but revealing essay: Chester Barnard, “Social Science: Illusion and Reality,” American Scholar, 1952, 2:359–360.
behavioral science umbrella. And in 1962 the PSAC produced a landmark report on the social sciences called, appropriately, “Strengthening the Behavioral Sciences.”

The remarkable influence of the hard-core emphasis and related behavioral science outlook received significant attention both from its champions, such as Bernard Berelson, who directed the Ford Foundation’s Behavioral Sciences Program from 1951 to 1957, and from critics, such as C. Wright Mills from sociology, Leo Strauss from political science, and Floyd Matson from psychology. While critics complained about the marginalized status of alternative investigative approaches associated with humanistic traditions in social science (i.e., those with strong historical, philosophical, and normative dimensions), proponents of hard-core social research and the behavioral sciences often portrayed such approaches as soft, less reliable, little better than folk wisdom or journalism, and not worthy of the label “science.”

This debate about the nature of the social sciences and their relations with the natural sciences had not initially attracted Harris’s attention; but when it did, Harris sided with the critics who complained that NSF’s limited focus on the “hard core” resulted in the unfortunate marginalization of humanistic approaches. Accordingly, Harris’s NSSF bill specified that the disciplines eligible for support would include “political science, economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, law, social statistics, demography, geography, linguistics, communication, international relations, and other social sciences.” International relations, history, and law were generally not considered sciences. History and law, in particular, were often regarded as humanistic endeavors. Thus Harris’s case for a new agency began to incorporate complaints raised by a growing group of social scientists and their congressional supporters who saw the need not only for more civilian funding but also for greater support for a wider range of social research beyond the so-called hard core.

Yet Harris had not yet taken into account sharper criticisms during those years that found the social sciences guilty of supporting repressive features of American foreign and domestic policies. Such charges acquired forceful advocates within the New Left, a loose mix of liberal and more radical groups, including Students for a Democratic Society and other activist organizations on university campuses, who crusaded for civil rights, protested against the Vietnam War, and called for the dissolution of the military-industrial-academic complex. New Left leaders often recognized a crucial transformative role for

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35 S. 836.
critical intellectuals, including critical social scientists such as the German émigré sociologist and political theorist Herbert Marcuse, sometimes called the “Father of the New Left,” and the recently deceased left-liberal sociologist C. Wright Mills. Not incidentally, Mills’s 1960 “Letter to the New Left” helped to popularize this term.36

But as of 1966, Harris’s involvement with the social sciences did not reflect those particular concerns about race and foreign policy, never mind the New Left’s broader “anti-establishment” viewpoint. In his 1966 Senate speeches, Harris explained that he had recently taken a trip to four Latin American countries—his family regularly vacationed in Latin America. What he saw convinced him of the need to “civilianize” the image of the United States in Latin America.” In a telling passage, he reported that many Latin American people “feel that, while we profess to be interested in democratic governments and democratic institutions, we actually feel a closer affinity for military organizations and dictatorships.” But that impression, Harris immediately added, was “erroneous.” As he saw it, then, the problem was not that U.S. foreign policy was actually repressive; nor was military-sponsored social research on foreign areas problematic in the sense that it furthered American imperialism. Instead, the problem for the United States and the social sciences was that cases like Project Camelot and Project Simpatico did not help to “correct that erroneous impression or clear up that mistaken image of our country in Latin America.”37

Nor by this point had Harris developed a strong case for going beyond the funding of hard-core social research and associated ideals like value neutrality, which critics from inside and outside the ivory tower claimed undermined the ability of social scientists to critique the American system. But as he investigated these matters further, Harris’s concerns about federal social science support expanded in these directions. Starting in 1967, his NSSF initiative thus acquired a sharper edge. Indeed, in the next couple years his initiative became a serious and, as it turns out, historically unique challenge to the post–World War II federal science establishment’s treatment of the social sciences.

THE CHALLENGE EXPANDS

National debate over Harris’s proposal began in 1966 and reached a high point in 1967. When Harris’s subcommittee held hearings on the NSSF bill in the fall of 1967, nearly a hundred witnesses testified, including representatives from government agencies, universities, educational societies, private research organizations, nonprofit foundations, and the social sciences. Through letters and other contacts, Harris’s subcommittee heard from another three hundred individuals, including dozens of social scientists. Harris had first become interested in finding a civilian alternative to support foreign area research. With this in mind, he endorsed Daddario’s proposal to amend the NSF charter in ways favorable to the social sciences. However, during the course of the 1967 hearings and in a series of articles for mainstream science and social science publications, Harris argued that the NSF had been, was, and would likely remain too cautious in its handling of the social sciences, with or without the Daddario amendment.38

37 Harris, “National Foundation for the Social Sciences” (cit. n. 27), p. 24999 (“civilianize”); and Harris, “Project Simpatico” (cit. n. 16), p. 2287.
38 Harris’s articles from that year include Fred Harris, “National Social Science Foundation: Proposed
What led Harris to this pessimistic assessment? As his staff director and others had already suggested, unequal relations between the social and natural sciences at the NSF and in the federal science establishment more widely were commonplace. While some politicians and scholars had questioned the establishment’s scientific pecking order before, Harris now used his authority as “Senator for Science” to articulate an elaborate critique of the science establishment’s mistreatment of the social sciences, starting with glaring funding inequalities.

While Harris’s NSSF proposal borrowed a lot from the NSF, he found that the social sciences fared poorly there, as seen in the uneven distribution of NSF funding for the various sciences. In 1966, less than 7 percent of the agency’s total budget went to the social sciences. That same year, a number of individual “hard” sciences enjoyed more funding than all the social sciences combined. Physics, mathematics, and chemistry received $50 million, $45 million, and $40 million, respectively. Yet the social sciences combined received only $31 million. If one considered the level of support for individual social science disciplines, the imbalances were, of course, far greater. One might claim that research in the natural sciences had become expensive and thus that the imbalance in support might not reflect mistreatment. But Harris provided additional evidence that the social sciences suffered under constraints owing to their inferior position vis-à-vis the natural sciences.39

Structural inequalities, for example, also contributed to NSF’s policy of limiting support to hard-core social research. So far Harris had raised this matter only indirectly, in the NSSF bill’s list of disciplines eligible for support. However, Harris now argued that the agency’s “hard-core” policy reflected the fact that natural scientists dominated its leadership, with physical scientists being especially powerful. To wit, the first NSF director was a physicist, Alan Waterman. So too was the second and then-current director, Leland Haworth. Under these conditions, social scientists would continue to be held back by the “unity of science theme” as “interpreted from natural or physical scientists’ point of view,” argued Harris. And they would have to rely on the “forbearance of natural and physical scientists and their limited understanding and insights into the potentials of the social sciences.”40

At one point during the 1967 NSSF hearings Director Haworth suggested to Senator Harris that oversight by natural scientists no longer posed a problem, because the agency’s leaders realized that the “social sciences themselves cover a very broad spectrum of activity.” Haworth further claimed that the agency now recognized that “all kinds of methods for carrying out research are open to the people who pursue this research.” But Haworth’s assurances did not change the fact that NSF’s approach remained grounded in a model of inquiry that took the natural sciences as the gold standard. At another point, Haworth even told Harris’s subcommittee as much, noting that the NSF only supported research on “social regularities” that aimed to produce “valid generalizations” and ultimately “scientific laws” through the methods of “objective analysis.”41

The agency’s handling of political science provided Harris with a clear example of how

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39 Harris, “Political Science and the Proposal for a National Social Science Foundation,” pp. 1089–1090.
40 Ibid., p. 1093.
41 Leland Haworth, in NSSF Hearings, 1967, pp. 68, 94.
restriction to the hard core interfered with the discipline’s healthy development. During the 1950s, the NSF had considered politics, the primary subject matter in political science, too hot to handle; sex, race, and religion had also been forbidden topics. But as the NSF’s social science program grew in size and stature over the years, social scientists interested in studying such controversial topics could hope to obtain funding. The NSF’s creation of a Social Science Division in 1961 suggested that all established social science disciplines would soon be included. At least those with a venerable tradition of research and scholarship had good reason to expect recognition and inclusion without much delay. In that year’s published annual report, the NSF director himself declared that “within the limit of available funds,” the agency would “support all the fields of science in a comprehensive way.”

Nevertheless, in the next few years the agency’s policy toward political science revealed strong resistance toward a more inclusive approach among its natural science leaders, prompting one unhappy scholar to complain that social scientists continued to “resemble the ‘official Negroes’ of NSF grants policy.” As long as “you wear the proper scientific garb, avoid political science and all controversial topics, and are properly respectful and grateful, one or two of you may be invited to an NSF cocktail party.” As another unhappy political scientist told Harris’s subcommittee, NSF leaders continued to treat the social sciences like “poor and stupid stepchildren.”

In explaining the harm resulting from such treatment, Harris argued that some disciplines, such as political science, still received “only token support.” As a point of comparison, he observed that in the United States there were nearly seven political scientists for every historian of science. Yet the latter discipline received nearly three times as much NSF funding: in 1966, $336,000 was awarded for political science but $1 million for history of science. In addition, anthropology, the smallest of the well-established social science disciplines, received almost $4 million—more than ten times as much as political science. Other disciplines such as law and history, which Harris counted as social sciences, likewise had “nearly indigent status.”

Daddario’s subcommittee also heard such criticisms of NSF’s treatment of the social sciences. Nevertheless, Daddario never adopted the sort of critical position now advanced by Harris.

A related line of reasoning in Harris’s expanding pro-NSSF case concerned the need to support “controversial” social research, an issue raised by political and scholarly critics who worried that federally sponsored research often supported a conservative and sometimes repressive status quo. Consider again the case of political science, since it figured prominently in Harris’s thinking. Knowing that research on politics might ignite public controversy, NSF leaders had at first simply refused to fund such work. Later, the agency began to support some political science research, but its natural science-oriented leaders

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44 Harris, “Political Science and the Proposal for a National Social Science Foundation” (cit. n. 38), p. 1088; and Harris, “Law and the National Social Science Foundation” (cit. n. 38), p. 148. One reason for the otherwise surprisingly high level of support for history of science is that the NSF had, since its early years, supported history and philosophy of science on the premise that these fields illuminated the special nature and great value of science and, hence, contributed to the public understanding of and support for science. NSF’s support for anthropology focused on biological anthropology and physical archaeology, including what scholars called the “new archaeology.” But the agency did not provide much funding for studies of contemporary societies that relied on qualitative cultural analysis and humanistic interpretation.
continued to invoke circumscribed eligibility criteria in order to place large areas of research within the discipline off limits. As a result, studies in the history of political thought, normative political theory, and public policy studies—all important parts of the discipline—suffered a serious disadvantage in the competition for funding.45

The more general worry that large areas of social research suffered in this manner emerged as a common theme during the NSSF debate. “The simple fact is that no social science can be ‘objective’ in the sense that its findings on any given line of social inquiry are of wholly neutral significance,” observed the legal scholar Geoffrey Hazard, Jr., during the 1967 hearings. Wherever the topics of social research had social significance, the research was bound “to be controversial from someone’s point of view.” Hazard urged Congress, funding agencies, and the social science disciplines to consider the problem of providing adequate support for controversial research intelligently.46 Senator Harris concurred, seeing the threat of controversy as a bad reason to curtail federal support for research on a wide array of important topics.

Inspired by this line of thinking, Harris argued that the proposed social science agency should receive an explicit mandate to fund “controversial” research. “If the social sciences are going to be innovative and creative and original,” he said, then “they are going to have to, by definition, be controversial.” It would be especially worthwhile to support studies that could “challenge established orthodoxies and accepted truisms and imply a criticism of the past.” Congress should therefore establish legislation encouraging “research into dangerous areas,” agreed the sociologist Irving Horowitz, who, not incidentally, had recently established himself as a major advocate of C. Wright Mills’s critical sociology. In the pages of Science magazine, Harris added that existing federal science agencies, owing to a natural concern about protecting their ongoing scientific programs and avoiding unwanted political scrutiny, would probably not support such research. Harris reasoned that this pattern of avoidance applied to the NSF. But it also applied to “mission-oriented agencies,” which typically “restricted” their support to “noncontroversial” studies.47

Since so much controversy arose during the 1960s over federally funded research on sensitive issues such as war, population control, race relations, and poverty, one might suspect that Harris was exaggerating here, just to make his case stronger. But this interpretation would overlook Harris’s sound point that federal agencies generally did not intend to support research that would provoke controversy and unwanted criticism, from either internal or external interests. Indeed, during the NSSF debate representatives from federal agencies themselves confirmed this point about the power of institutional pressures to avoid controversy. Harris, in turn, presented that insider acknowledgment of these pressures to buttress his argument for a new agency that would be exceptional in its ability to sponsor research critical of the status quo.48

Of course, a new agency dedicated to the social sciences could itself become risk

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45 Harris, “Political Science and the Proposal for a National Social Science Foundation,” pp. 1094–1095.
48 Thomas L. Hughes from the State Department explained that research aiming to foster “innovation” often entailed a “high risk,” something the NSSF would be better prepared to handle than a mission-oriented agency, which needed to “keep its program supportive of its mission.” See Harris’s review of Hughes’s point and similar.
averse, even without pressure from cautious natural scientists. Aware of this danger, Harris thus called for innovative structural features that would encourage the NSSF to support risk-taking research. He found all of the following suggestions presented during the 1967 hearings attractive. To “review research proposals” rejected by the primary NSSF committee, the NSSF could include a “mavericks committee” whose goal, as suggested by the international studies expert Vincent Davis, would be to encourage “‘innovative,’ ‘bold,’ ‘original,’ and ‘controversial’ thinking” of the sort Senator Harris had “repeatedly” discussed. The NSSF could also receive an “endowment” to help mitigate the impact of uncertainties in the yearly budgetary cycle and thus enable the agency to support “high risk research,” as recommended by the sociologist Peter Rossi. In addition, the agency’s governing board could include scholars not so “widely recognized” by “the establishment,” as proposed by the social psychologist Harold Guetzkow. Guetzkow wanted the NSSF to fund research about the “very processes involved in power and administration” and the “techniques for the control of power.” “You do not want just the ‘establishment,’” he asserted. To which Harris responded: “Yes; precisely.”

Finally, Harris fortified his critique of existing funding arrangements by placing them in a wider historical context. In doing so, he underscored how the natural science–oriented principles, policies, and structures allegedly responsible for degrading the social sciences had become firmly entrenched only rather recently, since World War II. Given Harris’s personal story and political convictions, we should not find it surprising that his historical account began with the New Deal. During the 1930s, social scientists had risen to national prominence through their close involvement in New Deal policies and programs. According to Harris’s estimate, during that earlier era of extensive liberal reform 24 percent of federal funding went to the social sciences. However, during World War II and the early Cold War years the social sciences had been greatly overshadowed, particularly by the physical sciences. In the dramatically transformed federal science landscape, enormous increases in public funding accompanied a burgeoning network of national science agencies and advisory groups that placed the natural and physical sciences at the “center of the stage.” Meanwhile, the social sciences had been left “out in the cold,” receiving “only intermittent and superficial attention from the federal science establishment.” In terms of funding, representation, and influence within this establishment, the social sciences had been relegated to “second-class citizenship,” argued Harris.

Taking an even wider view, Harris, with the help of scholars favorable to his proposal, interrogated the history of the social sciences’ quest for scientific legitimacy. Historically, the social sciences had much in common with the natural sciences, a point Harris always acknowledged. However, he also believed that the social sciences had profited from extensive connections to the humanities, though, unfortunately, since World War II the federal funding system had helped undermine these connections. Numerous supporters of Harris’s bill agreed that the social sciences needed to break free from a restrictive and in recent times increasingly dominant natural science model. For instance, the political scientist Lindsay Rogers suggested rewording Harris’s bill by replacing all references to “social sciences” with “social studies,” for the latter term suggested an investigative stance.
less obsessed with demonstrating scientific rigor and more interested in pursuing whatever form of social inquiry could illuminate the particular issue at hand. The proposed agency, Rogers added, might even be renamed the National Social Studies Foundation. Similarly, Irving Horowitz warned that the “oversimplified identification . . . with natural science techniques” had become so powerful that it now threatened to undermine the social scientist’s search for “the truth.” Social science, agreed Harris, did “not need the cover of the natural-science umbrella.” Under the present regime, however, only social research “most akin, by virtue of methodology, to the natural and physical sciences” received NSF support.\

So, as his understanding of the NSF and the postwar federal science establishment acquired historical depth, Harris began to embrace the message of critics interested in cultivating the social sciences’ humanistic dimensions and critical potential. Given the extensive reforms that seemed necessary, Daddario’s proposed amendment to alter the NSF charter seemed far from adequate. As Harris put it, as long as the social sciences remained “integrated on a 90-10 basis” at the NSF, they would be better off having “separate but equal facilities.” Though more money from civilian sources surely remained a main concern, this problem constituted only the iceberg’s tip. Harris now argued that a new social science agency would help usher in major reforms in the funding, representation, structural position vis-à-vis the natural sciences, scientific status, and anticipated social impact of the social sciences. But in the end, his robust challenge to the federal science establishment failed.

THE CHALLENGE FAILS

To succeed, Harris’s proposal needed a favorable vote from his subcommittee, followed by favorable votes from the parent committee and then the Senate; a favorable vote on a companion proposal in the House of Representatives; reconciliation between the two legislative bodies; and, finally, the president’s signature. So, what actually happened? In June 1968 Harris’s subcommittee voted favorably on his bill. McClellan’s Committee on Government Operations then approved it and issued a strongly supportive report. But the bill went no further and thus never made it to the Senate floor for a discussion and vote.

The literature on this episode alleges that two factors were mainly responsible for the bill’s failure. First, according to existing accounts, Harris’s bill faced significant opposition from two groups, one being social scientists themselves. Harris’s biographer states that “among social and physical scientists the response to Harris’s proposal generally was tepid.” In a published interview between the eminent historian of science I. B. Cohen and the physicist Harvey Brooks, Cohen claimed that social scientists who testified at the 1967 NSSF hearings expressed “serious misgivings.” Brooks, a prominent national science policy advisor and a member of NSF’s governing board at that time, agreed: “you’re right about

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51 Lindsay Rogers to Harris, 29 Mar. 1967, Box 84, Folder 1, Harris Papers; Horowitz, in FSISSBHR Hearings, p. 242; Harris, “Case for a National Social Science Foundation” (cit. n. 38), p. 508; and Harris, “Political Science and the Proposal for a National Social Science Foundation,” p. 1094. Gieryn refers to this type of claim as the case for “alternative methodology”: Gieryn, “U.S. Congress Demarcates Natural Science and Social Science (Twice)” (cit. n. 3).

52 Harris, in NSSF Hearings, 1967, p. 90.

the social scientists; most of them were opposed to the Harris plan.” On a similar note, Thomas Gieryn asserts that “political enthusiasm” for Harris’s proposal “waned in part because social scientists themselves did not speak for its creation with one voice.” He adds that when the NSSF debate revealed a division of opinion among social scientists, Harris gave up the fight in 1967. This last point—that Harris abandoned his bill—is clearly mistaken. The comments emphasizing the extent and influence of social science opposition are problematic as well, for various reasons.

Good evidence indicates that, in fact, Harris’s bill had significant support among social scientists. At least many social scientists who testified at the 1967 NSSF hearings expressed their approval. In addition, Harris claimed that the mail to his subcommittee from social scientists—and from physical scientists—was “overwhelmingly favorable.” One might wonder if he overstated the extent of such support. Yet examination of the archival records indicates that the great majority of social scientists who expressed their views to his subcommittee did indeed support his bill. While these sources of evidence cannot be taken as representative of social science opinion more broadly, such evidence at least raises significant doubts about the notion that social scientists who opposed Harris’s bill represented the majority.

Just as noteworthy, the configuration of social science opinion falls into a predictable pattern: namely, the “haves” tended to oppose Harris’s bill, while the “have nots” tended to support it. A telephone survey of the executive secretaries of professional social science associations found “no consensus within the organized social science community” and also indicated a divide between the more supportive “professional staff of the younger, interdisciplinary, regionally oriented associations” and the less supportive staff of the “more senior, disciplinary-based organizations.” Besides being consistent with evidence from the NSSF hearings, these survey results corroborate the analysis by the sociologist and social science policy expert Harold Orlans. Orlans found that while “social scientists have been thoroughly divided about the wisdom of maintaining a close political and administrative alliance with natural scientists,” a “majority of what might be called ‘establishment’ social scientists . . . have tended to oppose the [NSSF] legislation.”

Yet even more important to understanding the bill’s fate is the question of whether the


55 Harris, in NSSF Hearings, 1967, p. 263. Boxes 83 and 84 in the Harris Papers contain the bulk of the subcommittee’s correspondence about the NSSF bill with social scientists and other scholars as well as with various private organizations and public agencies.

56 Untitled document reporting on telephone survey, p. 1 (“no consensus”), Box 85, Folder 3, Harris Papers. Regarding the proposal for a new agency, this document states that “professional cleavages” within the American Psychological Association are “so deep. . . . ‘Rat’ psychologists (experimental) are likely to favor expansion of the NSF, social psychologists would tend to favor a separate foundation” (p. 3). Other associations were “so deeply split (or undecided) that a decision could go either way” (p. 1); and some others had not taken much interest in the matter. For Orlans’s findings see Harold Orlans, “Social Science Research Policies in the United States,” Minerva, 1971, 9:7–31, on pp. 8, 12. Orlans had extensive knowledge about this issue, for he had been the head of a large congressional study published in 1967: The Use of Social Research in Federal Domestic Programs, Staff Study for the Research and Technical Programs Subcommittee, Committee on Government Operations, U.S. House of Representatives (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, Apr. 1967), Pts. 1–4. This study also included a survey of social science opinion on Harris’s bill that found significant opposition from, as Orlans put it, “establishment” social scientists, meaning “influential advisers to government agencies and leaders in the affairs of the Social Science Research Council, the National Academy of Sciences, and the National Science Foundation.” He added that the survey results were not “representative” of social science opinion more broadly: Orlans, “Social Science Research Policies in the United States,” p. 12.
precise balance of social science opinion played a key role. Suppose a reliable poll showed that three of every four academic social scientists—or even four of every five—supported Harris’s proposal. Would that have made the difference? Probably not. There is no reason to believe that a decidedly favorable balance of social science opinion would have done much to push the proposal through the political channels, for when it came to major science policy matters social scientists had limited power and marginal status—two conditions Harris intended to change.

Perhaps, then, opposition from influential natural scientists or political figures doomed Harris’s effort. To be sure, criticisms of Harris’s proposal put forth by the physicist and NSF director Leland Haworth and by other leading figures in the national science system like the chemist and PSAC chairman Donald Hornig posed a major obstacle. Had they expressed strong support, the proposal’s chances of success would have been greater—perhaps much greater. The limited attention to the NSSF proposal in the House of Representatives also posed a major obstacle. In 1966 a House bill identical to Harris’s NSSF legislation (H. R. 18479) went to the Committee on Education and Labor. But this committee and the House more widely took no further action in 1966 or 1967. Because the House had already voted in favor of Representative Daddario’s amendment, gaining House approval for a new social science agency became difficult.

Still, when the 1967 hearings ended no dominant view on Harris’s proposal emerged within the government, a critical point not recognized in the existing literature. The 1967 hearings themselves revealed no consensus among federal agencies and departments. Testimony from their representatives indicated the absence of a party line: some expressed opposition, some remained neutral, and some stated approval. And though Daddario’s proposal had done well in the House, it had made no headway in the Senate.57

In fact, one could argue that in the second half of 1967 and continuing into 1968 Harris’s proposal had a decent chance of success. It had strong support from Harris’s subcommittee, including the fiscally conservative Republican Karl Mundt from South Dakota, from the parent Committee on Government Operations, still chaired by McClellan, and from the Senate more generally. In May 1968 a Washington Post editorial remarked that Harris’s proposed agency offered many “advantages.” In June Harris’s staff director observed “a great deal of interest” within the Senate in pushing his bill through “rapidly.” Furthermore, the Oklahoma senator himself had advanced from up-and-coming star to formidable political presence. As an article in Science magazine remarked, Harris, after only three years in the Senate, had “achieved a position of visibility and influence surpassing that of many of his more senior colleagues.”58 To wit: he still had his own subcommittee; he had already become the Senate’s top science policy expert; he could count on numerous political allies among the reigning liberal Democrats; and he had recently been appointed to the powerful Finance Committee (again an unusual position for a junior senator) and to the historically important Kerner Commission by President Johnson.

So, how important was the second factor invoked in the existing literature to explain the fate of Harris’s NSSF proposal—namely, passage of the Daddario amendment? In mid-July 1968 Congress voted favorably on this amendment, granting the NSF authority to support applied research and establishing an explicit mandate to promote the social

57 On the lack of a government party line see Lyons, Uneasy Partnership (cit. n. 3), p. 292.
sciences. Thomas Gieryn and Otto Larsen claim that this development made Harris’s proposal redundant in a fateful way: “redundancy . . . put a stop to the proposed secession of social science from NSF” and thus to the NSSF initiative. The suggestion that many politicians, national science figures, and social scientists would have been satisfied with the Daddario amendment surely contains some truth. However, it is erroneous to say that Harris’s proposal had become redundant. As we have seen, and as one of the nation’s leading science policy writers put it, the Daddario and Harris proposals emanated from “very different perceptions” about what needed to be done to strengthen the position of the social sciences in Washington.59 Larsen’s notion of a “proposed secession” is also misleading because there was no serious consideration that the social sciences might leave the NSF. In fact, as NSF director Leland Haworth explained at the 1967 hearings, his agency planned to expand its social science support. Harris fully endorsed such expansion as well.

More important, no evidence indicates that those who advocated the larger goals associated with Harris’s bill would have found the Daddario amendment’s passage satisfactory. Harris certainly didn’t, as he continued to promote his NSSF proposal the following year. I suggest that to understand why the window of opportunity for Harris’s bill closed, we need to broaden our analysis to include the twists and turns in the troubled relationship between social science and American liberalism in the late 1960s. In the final years of that turbulent decade, a series of explosive political events and mounting social conflicts spelled trouble for Harris’s proposal.

While powerful challenges to the nation’s liberal agenda and its social science advocates were by no means confined to 1968, this year has special significance for the present story. In March, with victory over the enemy in Vietnam still nowhere in sight, President Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election. As the war dragged on, antiwar demonstrations spread, and public confidence in the nation’s foreign policy tumbled. Just as troubling for liberal leaders who had made racial equality and racial integration a top national priority, the movement for racial reform had acquired a militant wing, symbolized by the phrase “Black Power.” After a white assassin killed Martin Luther King, Jr., in April, racial rioting scarred dozens of cities and towns across the country. Liberal politicians and intellectuals faced further problems associated with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, commonly attributed to the escalating financial burdens associated with the Vietnam War and new domestic social programs. Meanwhile, a resurgent conservatism gained momentum, marked by Richard Nixon’s triumph over Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 presidential election, thus ending nearly a decade of liberal Democratic control of the Executive Branch—though liberals still had majorities in the two legislative houses. Disliked and in many cases despised by liberal, left-liberal, and radical intellectuals, Nixon had little support among social scientists generally. Seventy-five percent of them voted for Humphrey, a strong supporter of the alliance between social science and American liberalism, while only 20 percent voted for Nixon.60

These events had profound consequences, puncturing the hope that social science and national progress marched together and raising doubts about the status of the social science knowledge that had informed so many of the decade’s liberal policy initiatives. In 1968 James Tobin, the chairman of NSF’s Social Science Advisory Committee and a former member of the President’s Council of Economic Advisers, captured the widespread sense of disillusionment: “at the moment, when our nation and the world are beset by so many intensely urgent and baffling social problems, one reaction is to turn to the social scientists and ask them for the solutions.” Unfortunately, continued Tobin, “social scientists are embarrassed, for they just don’t have a well-stocked shelf of firmly known laws of society from which solutions can be drawn.” Furthermore, Tobin emphasized that “it is by no means solely lack of knowledge that stands in the way of solutions to social problems. Real conflicts of interests and values are involved, and these will not be resolved by scientific inquiry, however successful.” Though the nation’s new president did not reject social science expertise in general, Nixon turned to scholars with moderate and more conservative orientations, including prominent social scientists who soon became known as neoconservatives, among them the sociologists Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan.61

The “sharecropper’s-son-turned-Senator-for-Social-Science” became enmeshed in these dramatic transformations. After Johnson announced that he would not run for president again, speculation suggested that Harris might become the running mate of any of the three most likely Democratic presidential candidates: Robert Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, and Eugene McCarthy. In mid April Harris and his close friend Walter Mondale became the leaders of Humphrey’s presidential campaign—as mentioned earlier, Mondale, Kennedy, Humphrey, and McCarthy all signed Harris’s NSSF bill. And Harris came within a hair’s breadth of being chosen by Humphrey: the day after Humphrey received his party’s official nomination (during the strife-ridden 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago), he picked Maine’s Edmund Muskie instead.62 One wonders: If Harris had won the nomination and Humphrey had become president, would Harris’s NSSF bill have been approved? Speculation aside, the actual course of events unfolded very differently—for the liberal Democrats, for Harris, and for the social sciences.

Harris’s views on war and race took a critical turn as well, leading him away from the increasingly fragmented liberal coalition and toward what he called the “New Populism.” When he first arrived in the nation’s capitol, the Oklahoma senator was a hawk. But by the summer of 1968 Harris had become an outspoken opponent of the Johnson administration’s war in Southeast Asia and its support of military dictatorships in Latin American countries including Colombia and Chile. In addition, while he had always supported civil rights legislation, he became publicly outspoken about racial problems at this time. One of the Kerner Commission’s most active members, Harris helped frame the hard-edged outlook of its final report. Common wisdom predicted that the report would present a bland “establishment” perspective. But with Harris’s firm input, this report became

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62 Lowitt, Fred Harris, pp. 63–81.
famous for its emphasis on the problem of “white racism,” for its warning that the nation was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white,” and for its declaration that tackling unrelenting racism and poverty would require a “compassionate, massive, and sustained” federal commitment. Later that year Harris published his first book, where he described his experiences serving on the Kerner Commission, reasserted its dire findings, and argued that “nothing less than a national commitment and a national mobilization, led at the highest levels of our government, will meet the challenge of our generation, the crisis of our day. We must open up society, and it cannot be done ‘on the cheap’ or without change.”

Harris’s evolving criticisms of American society, government, and foreign affairs mirrored his evolving interests in the social sciences, which he now viewed as critical tools needed to create a real democracy of, by, and for the common people rather than for privileged interests. In this democratic spirit, Harris supported his friend Walter Mondale’s “Full Opportunity and Social Accounting Act,” a legislative proposal that called for the creation of a Council of Social Advisers (CSA), which would issue an annual national social report and provide guidance to the president and Congress about establishing and achieving national social goals. Harris and Mondale argued that the CSA would complement Harris’s NSSF initiative by providing social scientists with greater powers, responsibilities, visibility, and influence. Of special importance, the CSA would have a public mandate to develop social science indicators to illuminate the quality of American life in measurable ways and make any gaps between social goals and social realities visible. Like Mondale, Harris reasoned that this initiative would mark a big improvement over the nation’s established economic accounting system, which was coordinated through the Council of Economic Advisers and which focused, in Harris’s unflattering terms, on “measuring the rather cold and quantitative facts of unemployment, Gross National Product and individual and corporate income.”

Harris likewise called on social scientists to “serve” the New Populism, whose goals were “to distribute income and wealth more fairly,” “to deconcentrate economic and political power,” and “to make real the power and liberty of the people.” On the flip side, he attacked a large body of social science work that emphasized the importance of elite leadership in democracies. In his view, by implying that common people were incapable of making important decisions, this scholarship justified antidemocratic political systems ruled by experts. Furthermore, he called for “New Populist caucuses at all meetings of economists and political scientists.”

Harris’s evolution inevitably placed him in conflict with more moderate and conservative Democrats. One article in *Harper’s Magazine* identified Harris and Mondale as “Establishment Radicals.” Starting in 1968, Harris thus found himself losing favor with President Johnson, who didn’t appreciate his criticisms of U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam and Latin America. Johnson also deemed Harris’s Kerner Commission activities unduly

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64 Harris, *Alarms and Hopes*, p. 145.

critical of his administration’s efforts to heal the nation’s racial wounds. Harris’s emphasis on the problem of “white racism” as an underlying cause of urban riots also upset the more conservative Arkansas senator John McClellan, whose Committee on Government Operations concluded its own investigation of urban rioting by pinning the blame on the liberal mass media and radicals, including black nationalists and Communists. Contrary to Harris, McClellan dismissed the notion that rioters had legitimate grievances based on political, economic, and social realities.\(^{66}\)

In the final piece of this story, the torments of American liberalism and the social sciences combined with Harris’s own political and intellectual evolution to bring a halt to the NSSF initiative. In January 1969 Harris once again introduced his proposal in the Senate. By this time the number of cosponsors had risen to thirty-two—a dozen more than the original twenty, indicating that the bill still had strong support among Senate liberals. In addition, the proposed agency’s responsibilities now extended beyond the original focus on the provision of research to include the administration of a periodic national survey of the social sciences, including recommendations for improving their development and use, and the promotion of social science education and training.\(^{67}\) But that fall the Senate abolished Harris’s subcommittee. He claimed that his conflict with McClellan led to its demise, though other factors contributed as well: a general financial squeeze, declining support for science within the Congress and the Republican-controlled White House, and an effort to reduce the number of Senate subcommittees. But whatever the precise set of factors, Harris, “with no subcommittee base” to count on, could no longer “push the NSF proposal,” as he himself observed.\(^{68}\)

In the Senate the task of considering Harris’s legislation subsequently rested with a new Special Subcommittee for Social Program Planning and Evaluation, chaired by Mondale. Though Mondale had a friendly attitude, recent reductions in overall federal science spending meant that the government was now unlikely to “reorder its priorities to provide the social sciences with a more equitable share of federal research funds.” A report from the American Psychological Association stated more directly that, with the Congress now “emphasizing budgetary restraint,” the chances of creating the proposed agency were slim.\(^{69}\)

A HAPPY ENDING AFTER ALL?

Should we nonetheless conclude that “all’s well that ends well”? Gieryn reasons that the Daddario amendment’s success gave the social sciences greater standing within the NSF, which then served them well in the coming decades. As evidence, he suggests that when aggressive attacks from conservative politicians, intellectuals, and popular writers pro-

\(^{66}\) On Harris’s changing relationship with Johnson see Harris, *Does People Do It?* (cit. n. 8), pp. 86–121. On his conflict with McClellan see Evans and Novak, “Mondale and Harris” (cit. n. 63), p. 94; and Lowitt, *Fred Harris*, p. 54.


\(^{68}\) Harris to Mark Solovey, 28 Sept. 2009. Harris noted that his conflict with McClellan led to his subcommittee’s demise. For other factors see Brezina, “Rise and Demise of the Senate Subcommittee on Government Research” (cit. n. 12).

duced a major crisis in federal funding during the early Reagan years, the NSF “success-
fully” defended the social sciences.70 Like the claim about redundancy, this one about a
happy ending is critical in assessing the historical significance of Harris’s initiative. And
as with the redundancy claim, the reasoning supporting the judgment about a happy
ending is problematic, in this case owing to three considerations.

First, the Daddario amendment’s symbolic victory for the social sciences did not lead
to additional NSF support, higher status, greater representation, or more equal relations
with natural scientists within the agency. The social sciences still received only a small
portion of the agency’s total research budget at the end of the 1960s. Furthermore, all
major gains came in the decade’s first half: the social science portion rose from 3.2 percent
in 1960 to 5.8 percent in 1965, but climbed only a tad higher, to 5.9 percent, in 1969 and
then began to decline, making up 5.3 percent of NSF research obligations during the
1970s. Natural scientists remained dominant in the agency’s top leadership positions as
well. As of 1969, the agency’s twenty-four-member governing board (called the National
Science Board [NSB]) had only one social science representative, and he was a quanti-
tative political scientist, James G. March; the NSB chairman was a biochemist, Philip
Handler; and the NSF director was still Haworth, a physicist.71 Bare facts like these help
reveal how little the Daddario amendment actually accomplished.

Second, that amendment did not prevent a major agency restructuring in the mid 1970s
that effectively demoted the social sciences. Ever since 1961, they had been united in
NSF’s Division of Social Sciences. Despite other inequalities and hierarchical relations,
ships, this division had the same organizational status as the agency’s major
scientific divisions for the biological and physical sciences. But the restructuring
divided the social sciences and placed them in two different divisions, one for
Behavioral and Neural Science and another for Social Science. In addition, the agency
then grouped these and some other divisions under a new “research directorate” for
Biological, Behavioral, and Social Science led by a biologist. Thus, even before the
Reagan era the social sciences experienced increased subordination within NSF’s
organizational structure and scientific pecking order.72

Third, as for the goal of strengthening and protecting social science from public attacks,
the Daddario amendment had little success and probably even did some harm. By revising
the NSF charter to include direct mention of the social sciences and by giving the agency
a mandate to support applied research, including applied social research, that amendment
made NSF’s social science efforts more visible and thus more likely to attract public
scrutiny of the sort that mounted during the 1970s and became so aggressive in the early
1980s. Moreover, the Daddario amendment did not provide the agency with any additional
means for protecting the social sciences. After all, before the amendment passed the
agency had already been supporting them for more than a decade. The agency’s legal
counsel had also established NSF’s authority to do so back in the early 1950s. Since
constant struggle marked the development of NSF support for the social sciences, social
scientists could welcome the Daddario amendment’s official recognition and affirmation

70 Gieryn, “U.S. Congress Demarcates Natural Science and Social Science (Twice)” (cit. n. 3), p. 74.
71 For the percentages see Larsen, Milestones and Millstones (cit. n. 2), pp. 104, 173. Basic information about
NSF leaders, including NSB members, comes from the agency’s annual reports.
72 Larsen, Milestones and Millstones, p. 101. Larsen notes that, as a result of this “drastic reorganization,” the
social sciences had been “dropped one critical step down the decision-making hierarchy.”
of that support. Still, in this respect the amendment’s chief accomplishment involved turning an established and authorized practice into a required one.73

The notion that the NSF, with the help of the Daddario amendment, defended the social sciences “successfully” seems dubious as well, unless one adopts a criterion of success so weak that it would please even their conservative critics. Though the social sciences weren’t left “penniless” during the Reagan era, as Gieryn notes, those conservative attacks did result in large funding losses. While social science support made up 5.3 percent of NSF research commitments during the 1970s, during the 1980s the comparable figure fell to only 3.8 percent.74

Representative Daddario did not intend to bring about the organizational demotion and financial woes of the social sciences, but he had been explicit about his limited intentions in strengthening them at the NSF. Daddario stated specifically that he did not want to “direct a disproportionate amount of total NSF support for the social sciences.” In the same sentence, he characterized the social sciences as “still relatively primitive.”75 In all respects, Daddario accepted the standard view within the agency and within the federal science establishment more widely that social science progress depended on following the path blazed by the allegedly more advanced natural sciences. This view continued to justify an array of institutionalized inequalities between the social and natural sciences in the nation’s capitol.

A RECONSIDERATION

In the course of his personal journey, Senator Harris became deeply interested in the social sciences, in their actual and potential contributions to American liberalism and then to the New Populism, and in the problems they encountered in the natural science-dominated federal science establishment. Harris’s complex engagements with the social sciences facilitated his transition from the Senate to the university classroom. After unsuccessful attempts to win the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination in 1972 and 1976, Harris left the political arena to become—What else?—a political scientist. He enjoyed a distinguished career at the University of New Mexico, winning teaching awards and publishing many books about the problems of race relations, poverty, and politics in America.76

73 As mentioned earlier, the Daddario amendment also gave the NSF a mandate to support applied research. Though this led to the development of a major program at the agency called RANN (Research Applied to National Needs), it ended up fueling dissatisfaction with the funding and uses of applied social science. On the rise and fall of RANN see Dian Olson Belanger, Enabling American Innovation: Engineering and the National Science Foundation (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue Univ. Press, 1988), esp. pp. 76–123. For a revealing account from the late 1970s about growing dissatisfaction with the ability of social science to help solve social problems see Aaron, Politics and the Professors (cit. n. 13).

74 Gieryn, “U.S. Congress Demarcates Natural Science and Social Science (Twice)” (cit. n. 3), p. 74. For the percentages see Larsen, Milestones and Milestones (cit. n. 2), pp. 104, 173. For an example of conservative attacks on the social sciences during the early 1980s see Donald Lambro, Fat City: How Washington Wastes Your Taxes (South Bend, Ind: Regnery/Gateway, 1980), esp. the chapter “Love and Passion at the National Science Foundation.” Lambro found numerous projects “laughably ludicrous,” including one he called the “pot-porno-penis project” (pp. 134–135).


76 In addition to the books cited earlier, Harris wrote the following: Fred Harris and Roger W. Wilkins, eds., Quiet Riots: Race and Poverty in the United States: The Kerner Report Twenty Years Later (New York:
As for his NSSF proposal, it rapidly faded from view. During the first Reagan administration, two sociologists, Samuel Klausner and Victor Lidz, encouraged their colleagues to lobby for a national social science agency as part of a larger effort to reverse the deteriorating relations between academic social research and the federal funding system. But throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, and continuing to the present, such a suggestion has received little more than passing consideration from scholars or politicians.77

Yet, this fall into obscurity did not occur because the NSSF proposal became redundant. Nor did the Daddario amendment do much to strengthen the position of the social sciences at the NSF, never mind more globally. Since confusion on these points arose later, it is worth noting that contemporary observers offered rather different interpretations. The Daddario amendment notwithstanding, the social sciences continued to “have a hard time getting into the best clubs,” noted the author of a book about the nation’s scientific elite. Social scientists still had “no explicit home in government (i.e., no agency primarily concerned with their development and application)” and “little representation in the policy-making framework of government-science affairs,” explained another author. Within the federal science establishment, the “viewpoint which sees social science as an impetus to social reform and a guide to ethical-moral decision was still short-changed, as were the more humanistic orientations,” observed yet a third writer.78

For historians of science and social science, Senator Harris’s mature case supporting his NSSF proposal is important because it represented a serious challenge to the federal science establishment’s second-class treatment of the social sciences since World War II. All of the following issues figured prominently in his thinking: the limited federal support of humanistic, philosophical, and critical dimensions of social science inquiry; the emphasis within military and civilian science agencies on the so-called hard core, partly to avoid involvement with social research of a normative, explicitly value-laden, or otherwise philosophical sort that might attract unwanted public scrutiny; social scientists’ marginal influence, power, and representation within the federal science establishment; and the entrenched scientific pecking order, as reflected in and supported by hierarchical relations between social and natural scientists in that establishment. Harris argued that to address such issues effectively, the nation needed to give the social sciences an agency of their own that had a substantial budget and the responsibilities his mature case specified—including a responsibility for funding humanistic studies, controversial research, and scholarship critical of the status quo.

The debate over Harris’s proposal in the late 1960s is also significant because it reflected a wider shift in the relationship between the social sciences and American liberalism. From the mid 1940s through the mid 1960s, many scholars and politicians of a liberal bent looked favorably on work that was putatively value neutral, nonideological,
and rigorously “scientific” in character, an attitude often exemplified in their enthusiasm for precise quantitative techniques of analysis. Such work helped establish the scientific legitimacy of the social sciences within a unified scientific enterprise led by the natural sciences. Such work also seemed practically useful, because it could provide policy makers with technical solutions and advice. To be sure, this approach received criticism from a few well-known critics on the liberal left such as C. Wright Mills (and before him Robert Lynd) and critics on the right, including Leo Strauss (and before him Robert Hutchins). Yet ever since the early post–World War II years, that approach had enjoyed strong support within the predominantly liberal social science mainstream and major private and public funding sources, including the military and the NSF. The alliance between that approach to social science and American liberalism reached its apogee during the Kennedy and early Johnson administrations. But by the decade’s end that alliance faced scathing attacks from growing groups of critics on both the right and the left. As Senator Harris himself moved away from the liberal center to become an “Establishment Radical” and then a leader of the New Populism, his case for a new social science agency expanded significantly, becoming the single most important effort to transform the position of the social sciences within the federal science establishment in accord with a variety of leftish concerns prominent at that time.

In addition, the story of Harris’s proposal suggests the need for further investigation of the relations between the social and natural sciences on the civilian side of the federal science establishment. The NSF and other civilian agencies have played important roles in elaborating particular views about the (relatively immature) scientific nature of the social sciences and their relevance to public policy making. These agencies also developed structures, policies, and programs to promote those views, in the process contributing to the power of those same views within the nation’s political and scientific communities. Moreover, this history has significant parallels and links to the much better known story of military-funded social science and the associated debates about whether such funding contributed to physics envy, scientism, a loss of professional integrity, and a demise of scholarly autonomy. In the case of Harris’s NSSF proposal, the stories of military and civilian funding for the social sciences were directly connected, most obviously through the debate over Project Camelot and the associated discussion about how increased funding through civilian channels and perhaps a new social science agency could mitigate the dangers of undue social science reliance on military patronage. Yet the story of Harris’s proposal constitutes only one interesting episode in a much larger history worthy of our attention.