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OPINION

Scientific suicide

March 27, 2005

The bad news about President Bush's plans to cut the funding for the Jefferson Lab in Newport News extends well beyond the loss of jobs that are important to the local economy and of people who are important to the social fabric of the community.

The implications - not only in the president's budget but in the priorities evident in the nation's spending patterns for the last decade or so - get at the heart of the kind of nation we want to be.


Do we want to be the kind of nation that trails others in its knowledge of science? Because that's the kind of nation we've become. Our kids' performance on standardized tests proves it: U.S. high schoolers come in behind their peers in 19 other industrialized nations when they take the same science and math tests in international comparisons.

Do we want to be the kind of nation that is content to depend on others to do the heavy lifting when it comes to scientific brainpower? Because that's the kind of nation we're becoming. Four in ten of the nation's doctorate-holders in science and engineering are foreign-born. Our universities are world class, but a large number of the graduate degrees they're awarding in science and engineering fields are to foreign students. Some of those students decide to stay here, but there are significant implications to depending on foreign brainpower, as we have discovered in the past two years, as the number of foreign student applicants has dropped sharply.





Do we want to be the kind of nation that is content to take advantage of discoveries made by other nations? Because that's what we'll have to do unless we hang on to our edge, unless we train the people who will make tomorrow's discoveries. That's what we'll have to do unless we upgrade K-12 science education and do a better job of preparing science teachers. That's what we'll have to do unless we provide adequate funding for research at the Jefferson Lab and other research facilities.

That's what will happen unless we end the kind of short-term thinking, the kind of careless neglect of the nation's intellectual infrastructure that is also evident in abandonment of our commitment to aeronautics research. On top of cuts totaling nearly 60 percent in the last decade, President Bush is cutting deeper this year and in years to come, threatening NASA Langley Research Center and the U.S. aeronautics industry.

The United States, largely because of its sheer size, still leads the world in research and development spending, with government and private spending combined. But its share

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has declined slightly. And the rapid, aggressive emergence of global competitors, notably China, reminds us of how quickly a challenger can catch up and overtake. That's why the implications of the Bush budget - on top of those that preceded it - are so frightening.

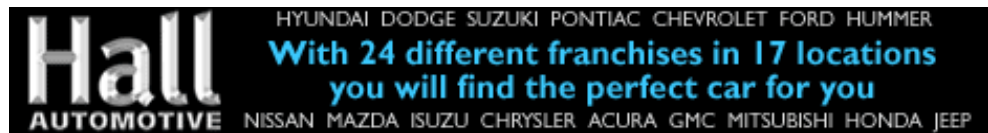
Take out money set aside for manned space exploration and homeland security, and research and development programs collectively take a hit in the president's spending plan. That includes important research programs for defense, climate change, nanotechnology, and the one that would fall hard on the Jeff Lab, the Energy Department.

That's no way to move ahead in a world where science is the currency of progress.

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