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What does the FIRST Act mean for archaeology and ASOR's members?

The Frontiers in Innovation, Research, Science, and Technology (FIRST) Act, a bill written by Congressman Lamar Smith (R – Tx), seeks to significantly reduce the budget of the National Science Foundation's (NSF) funding for social, behavioral, and economic sciences - which includes archaeology, particularly research conducted abroad. This comprises the primary federal support for archaeology, archaeometry, anthropology, and related fields. Many ASOR members and affiliated projects rely on this funding for part of their work, and the elimination of the funding would drastically change our ability to understand the past in the Middle East.

Problems with the bill for archaeologists

- ***Cedes American academic leadership*** - The U.S. is already struggling to keep up with more amply funded archaeological and anthropological research in Europe and China. Reducing federal funding even further will compromise our ability to compete intellectually on a global scale.
- ***Decreases access to regions in conflict*** - Archaeologists play a unique diplomatic role in contested territories, bringing an American presence to regions that may not otherwise welcome us. One example of this is the cultural heritage preservation work that is currently under way in Syria.
- ***Overlooks relevance of history*** – Archaeological research gives insight into issues such as urban development and how climate change effects human settlements. These issues require data spanning thousands of years, only available through study of the archaeological record.

Problems with the bill for all social scientists

- ***Threatens peer-review*** - Smith hopes to have Congress determine which research is worthy of funding – not specialists in the NSF. This would undermine the peer-review system by empowering the government, not accomplished specialists in the field, to determine what constitutes the most worthwhile research. Smith defines “worthwhile” as “critical for economic growth.”
- ***Contrary to the goals of the NSF*** - The bill discourages new American discoveries and dissemination of those discoveries. As the National Science Board states, some of the bill's “provisions and tone suggest that Congress intends to impose constraints that would compromise NSF's ability to fulfill its statutory purpose.”
- ***Research outcomes*** – The bill would require researchers to justify the relevance of their project outcomes as part of their proposal, and how the project would benefit public health, the economy, or national security. This presumes that researchers know what they will discover.

What you can do

We need to spread the message that archaeology is relevant, useful, valued, cost-effective, and educational. Please encourage officers at your institution (deans, provosts, university presidents, and society presidents) to protest this bill by writing op-ed pieces highlighting the flaws in the FIRST Act.

The bill has already passed the committee (20-16), so please also contact your congressional representative and encourage him or her to oppose this bill when it comes up for a vote in the House.