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## The price of freedom

One of our favorite American pastimes is taking pot shots at our leaders and at our leading institutions. We see it time and again — in sports, in politics, in business. Winning, reaching the top in any endeavor, seems to carry with it the inherent risk of becoming the focus of sometimes undesirable attention. We love a winner, but we're quick to look for weaknesses and faults in anyone at the top.

What seems to be an iconoclastic behavioral trait may well be a fundamental characteristic of our democracy — one grounded in that basic premise on which our country was founded — freedom.

We cherish and protect our freedom of expression, our freedom to achieve, our freedom to criticize, and our freedom to live without fear of reprisals or penalties, so long as these freedoms don't infringe on those of our fellow citizens.

What has this to do with agricultural research? Well, it helps me, at least, to understand and place in perspective what has been happening to agricultural research in universities and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. By any measure of success, the fruits of agricultural research in the United States are by-products of the activities of a winner. From humble beginnings in the late 19th century, agricultural research achieved a peak by the middle of the 20th century, and, along the way, it has attracted its detractors. During the past decade, they have condemned research for producing hard and tasteless tomatoes, for encouraging use of hazardous and poisonous chemical pesticides, for displacement of the field labor force by mechanical devices, for inattention to social upheaval of rural communities, for disregard of the environmental disruptions of soil, water, air, and wildlife, and for improving production capabilities beyond our capacity to utilize effectively all of our agricultural products. There has been a decade of reports and studies of state and federal agricultural research organizations. Most have been critical, recommending changes that range from minor

adjustments to drastic restructuring of our entire research system.

While we are quick to resent and refute the criticisms and deftly dismantle the allegations to our own satisfaction, we may overlook what lies beneath these expressions of concern: the freedom to criticize a winner and anxiousness to partake of the fruits of the research activities.

However, the freedom accorded to the critics of agricultural research must be equally accorded to its supporters. There are many beneficiaries of this research, but the benefits are far from universally understood and they often defy easy explanation.

The success of agricultural research in the United States is an old story, but this is no time to reflect on past glories. Too many people in the world are hungry today, and their numbers are increasing geometrically each week, each month, each year. Too many researchable challenges remain to permit complacency or neglect. Food costs and economic instability will rise inordinately if attention is not paid to production, processing, and distribution efficiencies.

Agricultural research must listen to the voices of freedom as it prepares for the challenges ahead. Changes are inevitable, but they must strengthen rather than weaken the structure and its products. Changes will be gradual and often only at the margins, because lifetime careers and vested interests will not be easily dislodged. Nevertheless, goals must be set and courses of action outlined to rejuvenate the system. Such action is justified, not to preserve status, but because publicly supported agricultural research in the United States offers the best hope for the future of people everywhere. Its contribution to freedom, individual contentment, and global security can be immense. Its cost is relatively small — a modest investment of dollars and, by all parties, a major investment of tolerance and goodwill.