

COMMENTARY

I think that most of our readers are concerned, both professionally and personally, with how their overseas colleagues view the state of American science. American physicists, though presumably better educated and well informed than the general public, still get their information on world affairs from the "media". But during, and preceding, the "Iraq War", these media have been generally condemned as support vehicles for the policies of the U.S. Government rather than the impartial purveyors of news and opinion we usually expect them to be.

The U.S. media's mishandling of the Iraq war-- including the build-up and aftermath -- has brought an unusually wide range of criticism and condemnation. Greg Dyke, General Director of the BBC, said he was "shocked while in the United States by how unquestioning the broadcast news media was during this war."

But even within the United States, such sentiments have spilled well beyond the usual circles of right- and left-wing media critics. I recently participated in a panel discussion at the National Press Club here on the media in Venezuela. In that country the private media has openly and consciously sided with the political opposition, and in the process disgraced itself in the eyes of journalists world wide. The comparison with American reporting on the war repeatedly came up. It was striking to see such broad agreement -- among people of very divergent views and politics -- that our media had indeed failed miserably to fulfill its basic duty to inform the public.

.....The most obvious evidence of this failure is a "results-based" measure. A Gallup poll last August found that 53 percent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was "personally involved" in the massacre of September 11. Where did they get this idea, for which no evidence exists?

..... Yes, it can happen again. The media's complicity in such scams is therefore much worse than a problem of bias or passivity. It is one of the greatest threats to democracy -- and security -- that this country faces.

Mark Weisbrot

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In the belief that our readers would appreciate some more direct insight into how their colleagues from Europe reacted to recent events, we present two commentaries. One is the reaction of a British physicist, who attended the spring meeting of the APS in Philadelphia. The other is an exchange of letters between a physicist in Rome, who was asked to review a paper, and the Editor of Physical Review. (This exchange appears differently in the printed version of this issue.) The exchange started with a brief note from the potential reviewer declining an invitation to review a paper. There followed a form letter from the PR Editor, sent generally to those who desire not to referee, and then a final letter from Rome. To conclude this debate, the PR Editor has conveyed, to this Editor, the following thought: " I confess to disappointment with people who can not distinguish a plea for scientific cooperation and support of a war." I share that disappointment. There seems to be no need to pursue this matter further here.

A.M.S.

"Who Needs Nukes?"

Fay Dowker

I was disturbed by the role the Forum played at the April 2003 APS meeting in Philadelphia. The meeting took place as bombs built by physicists were falling on Iraqi people, children were being sliced apart by cluster bombs[1], a city of 1.3 million people was being forced to drink sewage[2] and Iraqi hospitals were overflowing with corpses and limbless victims, the floors awash with blood[3]. A more serious and immediate consequence of the relationship between the physics community, government and society can hardly be imagined, and yet *the Forum on Physics and Society* convened no emergency debate.

When a group with an official "social responsibility" role within a larger organization, like the Forum, tacitly agrees to discuss the technical aspects of social problems without challenging the larger political framework imposed by the powers that be, then that group plays the part of

siphoning off members who feel concerned about social issues and neutralizing them in an organization whose real role is to support the status quo. It does this by providing a comforting appearance of critical activity, whereas in reality, discussion is limited to within extremely narrow boundaries.

A case in point was the Forum-sponsored session titled, "Nuclear Weapons and Missile Defenses: Current U.S. Policies and Programs," which I attended. The five talks in the session[4] were quite uniform in terms of the assumptions made. These shared assumptions, though unstated, are quite blatant and include:

1. *The US government is sincere when it claims to want to safeguard the security of the US population.*

The speakers indicated this, for example, by describing the actions of the government, when it acts in a way that manifestly makes the people of the US less secure, as a "missed opportunity" or "misguidance." They took the sincerity of the government for granted to an extraordinary extent, given that there is no shred of evidence for it. They did not entertain the possibility that the government aims to enhance the security of the economic interests of the US ruling elite, not the population as such.

2. *What critical scientists can contribute is an assessment of whether or not particular technologies can achieve specific objectives demanded by government. The objectives themselves, and wider government aims served by those objectives, are not to be subjected to scrutiny and criticism.*

The objectives are often very narrowly defined in technical terms (for example, shoot down this kind of tumbling missile surrounded by tumbling decoys, or maintain the working capability of the nuclear stockpile without physical testing), allowing scientists to maintain a veneer of neutrality and objectivity in making a judgment on them. "Missile Defense" is a case in point. Physicists' opposition to the program is overwhelmingly on the narrow, technical grounds that it won't work. Radical opposition is based on the assessment that if anything like it could be made to work it would allow the US to be even more unconstrained in its military aggression, threatening even more countries than it does at present, and on the compassionate, humane assessment that war is a catastrophe.

Of the four talks I heard, that by Richard Garwin was the most shocking. What he said was outrageous. He summarized a report, coauthored by him, that analyzed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and concluded that it was better for "US national security" to have the CTBT than not. His argument was that the US can achieve everything it wants to achieve without nuclear testing. He said: In the 50s I worked enthusiastically on many types of nuclear weapon but now conventional weapons have overtaken nuclear weapons; we are seeing on the news every night just how good these conventional weapons are now. And then he said, and I quote: "Who needs nukes?" The relish with which he celebrated the destructive capability of weaponry that was at that very moment bringing death, agony and anguish to mothers, fathers and children was appalling.

During the question time I stated that I found it horrifying that he could praise the capabilities of weapons that were being used in a criminal[5] invasion of a poor third world country. His response was, "Iraq is only a poor third world country because of its bad leaders [an irrelevant assertion that neglects the fact that the US bombed Iraq into a preindustrial state in 1991[6] and devastated its economy with a twelve year military siege[7]], and this is not a criminal invasion. I am not in favor of the war, but it is not a criminal invasion. You can read about my opinion."

I have not yet read Garwin's opinion of the Iraq war. But I think I can predict, using my analysis, what it will be. He will take for granted that US aims in Iraq are what the government claims -- removing weapons of mass destruction and so on -- despite the lack of evidence for

that; he will agree with those claimed aims; and he will criticize policy only on the grounds that invasion isn't the best way to go about achieving them. Am I right?

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References:

- [1] Robert Fisk, "Wailing Children, The Wounded The Dead; Victims Of The Day Cluster Bombs Rained On Babylon," *The Independent*, 3 April 2003.
- [2] Ewen MacAskill (in Basra), "Three weeks on, and still no water," *The Guardian*, 14 April 2003.
- [3] Robert Fisk, "Final proof that war is about the failure of the human spirit," *The Independent*, 10 April 2003.
- [4] <http://www.aps.org/meet/APR03/baps/tocT.html>.
- [5] "To initiate a war of aggression, therefore, is not only an international crime; it is the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole." Nuremberg Judgment, September 1946.
- [6] Martti Ahtisaar, Report to the UN Secretary General on humanitarian needs in Kuwait and Iraq, 20 March 1991.
- [7] "In search of an Iraqi policy," *The Economist*, 24th February 2001.

A Scientist's Decision Not to Review Papers for Phys. Rev.

Daniel Amit

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Electronic URL-Download Referral from Physical Review E
Code:
Title:

Received 08 January 2003

Dear Dr. Amit:

We would appreciate your review of this manuscript, which has been submitted to Physical Review E. This message is the COMPLETE REFERRAL. No hardcopy will be sent unless requested.

From: "Daniel Amit" <daniel.amit@roma1.infn.it>
To: "Physical Review E" <pre@ridge.aps.org>
Sent: Friday, March 21, 2003 6:11 PM
Subject: Re: Review_request ...

I will not at this point correspond with any american institution.
Some of us have lived through 1939.

Daniel Amit

From: "martin blume" <blume@aps.org>

To: <daniel.amit@roma1.infn.it>; <damita@green.fiz.huji.ac.il>
Subject: your email to the American Physical Society
Date: Tuesday, April 08, 2003 10:31 PM

Dear Dr. Amit,

We have received your email with your decision not to review a paper for us in light of American actions in the middle east. We recognize that reviewing manuscripts is a voluntary activity, one that you perform as a service to the physics community, and we thank you for your efforts.

Given the voluntary nature of your participation we of course respect your decision to cease, and have made an indication in our database so that no further papers will be sent to you for review until you inform us otherwise.

We ask, however, that you consider the following in hopes that in the not too distant future you will decide to review for us again.

We regard science as an international enterprise and we do our best to put aside political disagreements in the interest of furthering the pursuit of scientific matters. We have never used other than scientific criteria in judging the acceptability of a paper for publication, without regard to the country of origin of the author.

We have done this even in cases where some of us have disagreed strongly with the policies of that country, and we will continue this practice. We believe it is essential that all parties involved make every effort to separate social and political differences from their participation in scientific research and publication. The pursuit of scientific knowledge needs to transcend such issues.

Sincerely,
Martin Blume

From: "Daniel Amit" <daniel.amit@roma1.infn.it>
To: "martin blume" <blume@aps.org>
Date: Wednesday, April 09, 2003
Dr Blume, Editor in Chief
American Physical Society
Dear Dr Blume

Thank you for your letter of April 8. I would have liked to be able to share the honorable sentiments you express in your letter as well as your optimism in the future role of science and the scientific community. To be frank, and with much sadness and pain, after 40 years of activity and collaboration, I find very little reason for such optimism.

What we are watching today, I believe, is a culmination of 10-15 years of mounting barbarism of the American culture the world over, crowned by the achievements of science and technology as a major weapon of mass destruction. We are witnessing man hunt and wanton killing of the type and scale not seen since the raids on American Indian populations, by a superior technological power of inferior culture and values. We see no corrective force to restore the insanity, the self-righteousness and the lack of respect for human life (civilian and military) of another race.

Science cannot stay neutral, especially after it has been so cynically used in the hands of the inspectors to disarm a country and prepare it for decimation by laser guided cluster bombs. No, science of the American variety has no recourse. I, personally, cannot see myself anymore

sharing a common human community with American science. Unfortunately, I also belong to a culture of a similar spiritual deviation (Israel), and which seems to be equally incorrigible.

In desperation I cannot but turn my attention to other tragic periods in which major societies, some with claims to fundamental contributions to culture and science, have deviated so far as to be relegated to ostracism and quarantine. At this point I think American society should be considered in this category. I have no illusions of power, as to the scope and prospect of my attitude.

But, the minor role of my act and statement is a simple way of affirming that in the face of a growing enormity which I consider intolerable, I will exercise my own tiny act of disobedience to be able to look straight into the eyes of my grandchildren and my students and say that I did know.

With regard

Daniel Amit

PS I intend to distribute our exchange as much as possible. I authorize and pray that you do the same.