A WAVE OF ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM?

The atmosphere not only in Washington but in many state legislatures throughout the country is becoming, at the least, one of wariness toward the demands of science, and at a further extreme, one of downright unfriendliness. Two attitudes can be discerned; one can be expressed as, "Those doubters have had it their own way for too long; it's time they were cut down to size." The other is older and has long been a political cry, "We can't afford it." This one applies not only to science (it has been part of the cause of the drastic cutting of funds to the NSF) but applies as much to the ever-increasing costs of education in general. The forcing of economies upon great universities like Michigan and California is only one sign of a much more widespread feeling. Every educational administrator who can be thought to have made a mistake is considered fair game for drastic reprisals. School principals are under attack in many places and school improvement programs, or even school maintenance, are increasingly hard to finance. Student riots unfortunately intensify the feeling and one wonders why their instigators do not seem to realize that they are helping to destroy the goose that lays for them the golden eggs of education and a richer life. But perhaps the riots are themselves a sign that some students have lost interest in intellectual pursuits. In other words, the anti-intellectualism may exist within, as well as outside, our educational institutions. One hates to pursue this thought to its corollary that perhaps the damage to the universities wrought by the riots is intentional, but it is certainly a possible deduction. Yet the great majority of our students, and practically all of our biology students, are serious, hard-working citizens, more interested in understanding our working of a cell than that of the university dean's office.

What can we biologists do in this potentially alarming situation? In the first place, we must look to our public relations. The days of the ivory tower are gone. We have not only to justify our work and our plans to our fellow scientists, we have to make them stir up enthusiasm in the layman. We must make the layman see that biology is exciting not only for biologists but for every citizen, that it bears the hope of solving many great problems and of improving our physical lives as well as our understanding. Summer sessions, workshops, and special lectures have commonly been directed toward school teachers; some of them should now be directed to the layman. It is a challenge to make science interesting to the general public, but if successful, it can be most influential. We have also to mend our fences with the local politicians. We should press for sound biology teaching, with modern facilities, in the schools of our area. As biologists, we should try to influence the approach to the biological problems that surround us; every community has its difficulties with pollution, sewage disposal, the misuse of pesticides, neglect of parks, unnecessary deforestation, and, of course, family planning. But when we undertake this kind of activity, we must remember that in the hurly-burly of general politics the unwary biologist can be easily bewildered, while in the area where specialized knowledge counts he is supreme. Wherever possible, therefore, we should function as "recognized" biologists, for only thus can we achieve the dual aim of (a) getting the job done and (b) helping to stem the tide of disenchantment with science.

In the second place, those of us who teach might remember that giving the younger generation, whether destined to be doctors or business tycoons, a sound appreciation of biology is valuable not only for its own sake but for helping the long-term improvement of our public image. Courses or lectures on recent advances in biology, directed to the nonscience major, are more important now than ever before. An appreciation of the ways of research is good too, for the scientific ideals of patience, sincerity, self-criticism, and devotion still hold for most of us, (the shady practices of the "Double Helix" notwithstanding), and they contrast favorably with the aims of politics.

Another aspect of biology teaching is important for us all to think about. Many of our best undergraduates these days find the notion of a scientific career less appealing than that of a career in the service of mankind. The causes for this change of interest are doubtless complex; the identification of science in the popular mind with the atomic bomb and other military activity is a contributing factor, but not the only one. In any case, these young people see the needs and miseries of part of the world and long to help. But helpers who bring nothing more to their task than good will and a smattering of the local dialect are not going to make much of a dent in the world's needs; they require expert knowledge and practical training. Now it so happens that agricultural science, medicine, forestry, sanitation, and the understanding of land use are among the things most needed in the underdeveloped countries. We could therefore very well stress the possibility of skilled service in our advice to potential biology students and in our teaching. It may well prove that the most effective answer to anti-intellectualism will lie in an increased emphasis on the applicability of science to the improvement of man's life.

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