

PUBLIC POLICY Science, Politics, and the Difference

Keynote Remarks by James Schlesinger
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Since I am to speak about science, let me start with the science in which I *supposedly* was trained—or, if you prefer, trained in a *supposed* science—economics, “the dismal science,” as it is called.

When I was a professor many years ago, I had a grant from the Social Science Research Council to study professionalism. I found that for intelligence officers, systems analysts, economists, as well as other professionals, perfect objectivity was unattainable. For economists, there was a continuum I described as “the economist as saint or prostitute.” No one is surprised to hear an economic adviser to a President putting a gloss on economic conditions, or an economist who opposes a President's policies putting another gloss on conditions in, say, op-eds in *The New York Times* or elsewhere. In such cases, we may have professionals giving partisanship a bad name.

Now, let me talk about what in European universities through the 1700s called “the queen of sciences”—theology. For theology to have been called “the queen of sciences” may seem incredible in this age of skepticism—in which doubt has now become the *only* true faith. According to traditional theology, there are limitations on the human being and his intellect. The underlying message is that men are sinners, subject to corruption by their own interests and beliefs. (I use “men” in the generic sense—mankind. The ladies are NOT exempted.) As Martin Luther, citing *Romans*, underscored: “None is righteous, no not one.”

Science, as we know it, grew in an atmosphere of skepticism, in which inherited beliefs had to be subjected to rigorous testing. That was the needed defense against the corruption to which all human endeavors are subject.

Anointed to pontificate—and the hunt for heretics

It was in my federal-government career, especially at the old Bureau of the Budget and at the Atomic Energy Commission, that I learned the most about the “sociology” of science. In those early years after Trinity, I discovered in processing budgets for science that many scientists had come to see themselves as “anointed”—and to be funded without question by a grateful government. They also felt anointed to pontificate on all kinds of political subjects—to which science was only loosely connected.

Ultimately disabused of the belief that their particular entitlement to unlimited public funds would be embraced, other scientists came to believe that constantly underscoring some threat from which science would save humanity was a way to ensure a steady flow of resources. Alternatively, resources would flow in just being “useful” to political leaders. In its most extreme form, it has led to that travesty of science associated with the name of Trofim Lysenko

Let me cite three, more recent, examples.

First, British scientists, for example, at the behest of the Tory government, assured the British public that “mad-cow” disease was of little threat to human beings. Second, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), stated years ago that AIDS was a serious threat to the *heterosexual* population—in contrast to all of the available data.

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When challenged on this, the CDC's response was that it had to alarm the general public that it was at risk, in order to win broad public support for the money to fight AIDS—a political judgment.

Third and finally, there is the current faith of recent decades that global warming can with certainty be attributed to the release of greenhouse gases. It is now enshrined in the recent film *The Day After*. I have argued in the past that with all of the uncertainties, as well as the previous errors in prediction, we should approach this issue with some humility. That, unfortunately, is not the case. Orthodoxy stalks the land and with it the regrettable search for *heretics*.

In this connection, let me remind you of the words of a sometime colleague, Michael Crichton. In his Michelin Lecture at Caltech, titled "Aliens Cause Global Warming," he observes at the outset: "...even as a child I believed that science represented the best and greatest hope for mankind."

He later comments:

"I want to pause here and talk about this notion of consensus, and the rise of what has been called consensus science. I regard consensus science as an extremely pernicious development that ought to be stopped cold in its tracks. Historically, the claim of consensus has been the first refuge of scoundrels; it is a way to avoid debate by claiming that the matter is already settled.

"Let's be clear: the work of science has nothing whatever to do with consensus. Consensus is the business of politics. Science, on the contrary, requires only one investigator who happens to be right, which means that he or she has results that are verifiable by reference to the real world. In science consensus is irrelevant. What is relevant is reproducible results. The greatest scientists in history are great

precisely because they broke with the consensus.

"There is no such thing as consensus science. If it's consensus, it isn't science. If it's science, it isn't consensus. Period."

Science as science, and politics' proper place

My conclusion is simple: each time policy masquerades as science, it diminishes the public respect for science, which becomes viewed as just part of the political game. Science forfeits its own credibility on policy matters, as it loses public respect—and becomes just another element in the political war.

Science must strive toward genuine detachment, careful testing, objectivity. If so, it can play an immensely useful part in formulating public policy. If not, it reduces its own role, credibility, and influence.

Science, as science, does best—and is true to itself—only when it avoids the taint of corruption and politics. If scientists want to advocate policies, they should do so in the name of politics, not science.

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This article is adapted from Schlesinger's keynote speech to the 20th Anniversary Dinner of the Foundation-supported George C. Marshall Institute in Washington, D.C., in mid-June. The Marshall Institute encourages the use of sound science in making public policy about important issues for which science and technology are major considerations.