Science and Politics: Free Speech Controversy at Lawrence Laboratory

The Lawrence Radiation Laboratory, one of the nation's most distinguished scientific institutions, has been struck by a series of "free speech" controversies in recent months. The laboratory, which is operated by the University of California and is almost entirely funded by the Atomic Energy Commission, has facilities in two California locations, Berkeley and Livermore. Each has been under fire for allegedly stifling open discussion of controversial issues.

The Berkeley facility, a leading center for the study of high-energy physics and fundamental nuclear science, has been split by an internal debate over the right of scientists to hold formal political discussions at the laboratory during their lunch hours. The controversy has led to the banning of meetings, the circulating of petitions and counterpetitions bearing hundreds of names, the publishing of an underground newspaper, and the suspension of a controversial physicist.

The Livermore facility, a major center for developing nuclear weapons, has been accused of trying to muzzle two staff scientists who contend that existing radiation standards are too lax to protect the public from nuclear radiation hazards. Livermore has also been the target of demonstrations and of a lawsuit seeking to open the weapons laboratory to allow discussions between outsiders and staff scientists concerning the implications of weapons research. The article below discusses the controversy at the Berkeley laboratory, where only unclassified research is performed. A subsequent article will discuss the conflict at security-conscious Livermore.

The fundamental question at issue in the "free speech" debate at Lawrence Radiation Lab, Berkeley, is whether scientists and other personnel should have the right to discuss controversial political and social issues on the laboratory premises during off-hours. One group of scientists, including Nobel laureate Owen Chamberlain, insists that freewheeling discussion is not only a fundamental right but is also crucial to the optimum operation of the laboratory. But the laboratory management, headed by Nobel laureate Edwin M. McMillan, contends that political discussions are apt to destroy the effectiveness of the institution by polarizing the staff, disrupting normal work hours, and inviting an influx of outside activists. Consequently the management has banned all meetings except those dealing with technical issues and certain other topics.

The "free speech" controversy arose last fall, about the time of the Vietnam Moratorium, when a group of young graduate students and staff members expressed a desire to hold a couple of noontime discussions about war-related issues. One meeting was to have been devoted to the war in Vietnam as seen from the Vietnamese countryside; the other to a discussion of the military uses of chemistry and biology.

Nobelist Chamberlain recalls that the group of young scientists approached him and asked if it were possible to hold such discussions during their lunch hour. "I said 'Of course, though we'll have to tell the director [McMillan] what we're up to,' " Chamberlain recalls. "I went to the director and expressed our intention to hold these meetings. I assumed there would be no difficulty because it would be during the lunch hour. But the director said, 'Oh no—that's political—we shouldn't have any of that around the laboratory.' The director was also a little amazed that we had arranged for speakers before consulting him." Chamberlain says he assured McMillan there was no intention to present him with a *fait accompli*. McMillan ultimately denied permission to hold the meetings, and they were canceled.

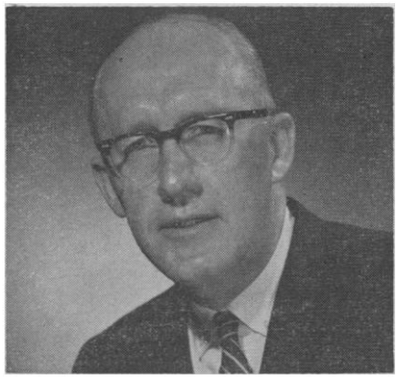
At about the same time the local branch of Scientists and Engineers for Social and Political Action (SESPA), whose membership includes some laboratory staffers, tried to distribute leaflets at the Rad Lab inviting participation in the 15 November antiwar march in San Francisco, but McMillan asked them to stop, so they did.

McMillan's actions seem to reflect a genuine concern about the safety and productivity of the laboratory and do not seem motivated by any ideological opposition to the "free speech" crowd. Both McMillan and his associate director, Robert Thornton, are said to be "liberals" on many of the issues the free speechers want to discuss. "I'm in sympathy with what they're trying to do," says Thornton, "but I wish to hell they'd do it somewhere else." Even Robert Cahn, a graduate student active in SESPA, acknowledges that laboratory officials "aren't preventing discussion of the war because they support the war." But whatever the management's motives may be, its policies have raised important questions about the degree of free political discussion that should be allowed in a scientific facility, particularly one financed by the federal government. The issue is cropping up increasingly in laboratories around the country as scientists become more and more concerned about social and political issues.

At the Rad Lab in Berkeley, after numerous complaints about his restrictive actions, McMillan appointed a five-man committee to reexamine what he described as the lab's traditional policy of "excluding political advocacy from the Laboratory." The committee was headed by Victor Zackay, associate dean of the college of engineering on the Berkeley campus. The other members included James Born, director of the Donner Laboratory; Melvin Calvin, Nobel laureate; Isadore Perlman, professor of chemistry; and Thornton. All five committee members are involved in management duties with the laboratory. In the eyes of some of those who wanted to hold the meetings, the committee was "loaded" against them.

Nevertheless, all concerned seem to agree that the committee did a patient and conscientious job of examining all viewpoints on the issue. The committee received and studied several hundred letters and held lengthy discussions with individuals and groups. On 25 February the committee issued its recommendations, which were, in essence, that lab facilities be used only for technical discussions and for such other programs as are required by the AEC. The latter category would allow continuation of

Bisplinghoff Nominated NSF No. 2



Raymond L. Bisplinghoff, dean of the School of Engineering of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, will be nominated by the President as deputy director of the National Science Foundation. He will be the first person to fill the $40,000-a-year job created in a reorganization plan enacted 2 years ago. George S. Hammond, chairman of the division of chemistry and chemical engineering at Caltech, was considered for the post earlier but was informed that his name would not be sent to the Senate after he had criticized U.S. operations in Cambodia (*Science*, 5 June). Bisplinghoff served as an associate administrator of the space agency from 1963 to 1965, then as assistant to the administrator until 1966 when he returned to M.I.T.

the laboratory's "affirmative action" program which seeks to assure equal opportunity to racial minorities. Though racial policies are clearly controversial and though the "affirmative action" program clearly has a social goal, the committee concluded that the program is "part of our mission" since it is "imposed by national and agency policy."

But the committee went on to ask: "Should we introduce in addition problems of a political and social nature outside of our assigned mission?" It answered: "We believe not. Moreover, we know from our sampling of Laboratory opinion that substantial numbers, perhaps a majority, of Laboratory employees would resent our doing so with varying degrees of emphasis. Thus, introduction of such discussions into the Laboratory proper will almost certainly lead to estrangement and division among Laboratory employees which we feel will, in the long run, impair the efficiency of our Laboratory and the solidity of its support by the community and the nation."

The committee said that while all citizens have the right to engage in social and political advocacy, laboratory employees can easily exercise those rights on the nearby Berkeley campus or in the community. The committee disputed the view that the laboratory should emulate the campus by having an open discussion policy subject only to rules governing the time, place, and manner of meetings. It suggested that enforcement of such rules would be difficult, and it added that, while the laboratory is part of the university, "it does not necessarily share with it the entire university mission, i.e., the critical examination of all aspects of society." Lab Director McMillan, on 10 March, accepted the committee's recommendations and designated several bulletin boards as appropriate places for notices about meetings that were to be held "away from the Laboratory."

The decision upset a number of people, including Owen Chamberlain. "I'm very distressed," Chamberlain told *Science*. "It raises a question whether I can continue with the Lab. Free speech is very important to me. In good conscience I can't be attached permanently to an institution that won't permit discussion of these issues."

Chamberlain argued that the prohibition will be "very harmful" to the proper functioning of the laboratory. "I claim it should be a standard function of the laboratory staff to discuss where all forms of science are taking us, whether this involves chemical pesticides or smog or new fuel systems or nuclear weapons policies," Chamberlain said. "These ought to be standard topics of discussion around the laboratory. Of course it's not the primary business of the laboratory, but as scientists we should be concerned with where science is taking us—especially with all the complaints from graduate students that scientists are just gadget makers who pay no attention to the implications of their work."

Chamberlain finds it "intolerable" for the Zackay committee to argue that "we are surrounded by areas where free speech is allowed so we don't need it at the laboratory." Besides, he added, the Berkeley campus is just far enough away to make it virtually impossible to schedule lunch-hour meetings there. Chamberlain took his complaints to the Academic Freedom Committee of the Berkeley faculty last March. He expects the committee to render a judgment this fall, but whether the committee will have much influence over the Rad Lab remains to be seen.

A more frontal assault on the restrictions was launched this summer by Charles Schwartz, a controversial physics professor from Berkeley who has a summer appointment at the Rad Lab. Schwartz had been active in helping to put out "The Real Lab News," an informal mimeographed newspaper that began publication in March in an effort to promote "free speech" at the Rad Lab. He takes delight in being something of a "bête noire" on the Berkeley campus. He has led demonstrations at Livermore; he flamboyantly gave up an Air Force research grant when the Air Force refused to assure him that the work was unrelated to military functions; and he was officially reprimanded in May by Chancellor Roger Heyns for requiring his students to take an oath that they would not cause "harm to man" through their scientific work.

Schwartz decided that "the best way to protect free speech is to exercise it," so he scheduled a series of noon-hour seminars at the laboratory to discuss problems involving science and politics. He asked McMillan for permission to use the main auditorium, but was turned down. And then a battle of wills and memos began. Schwartz posted a notice that the first meeting would be held in the auditorium on 2 July. McMillan asked him not to hold the meeting. Schwartz said he intended to hold it anyway. McMillan sent out a memo that the meeting violated laboratory policy and was therefore canceled. Schwartz sent out a memo saying he still intended to conduct the meeting. And so it went.

On 2 July, the day the meeting was scheduled, McMillan had the auditorium locked up. Schwartz therefore conducted the meeting outside, on the lawn near the cyclotron. Chamberlain requested, and was granted, the privilege of opening the meeting with a brief talk on the value of free speech.

Schwartz then spoke on nuclear weapons. He presented his view that the United States is headed for nuclear war and that this is accepted as a matter of national policy at the topmost levels of government. Schwartz says about 200 people showed up for the meeting. Besides Chamberlain, at least one other Nobelist, Luis Alvarez, was prominently in attendance, seated near the front of the audience.

The following week Schwartz again asked McMillan for permission to hold a meeting in the auditorium. The same clash of wills occurred; Schwartz sent out word that his second meeting would be held on 9 July; and McMillan promptly suspended his pay for 2 weeks for "open, flagrant and repeated defiance of Laboratory authority." Schwartz went ahead and held his second meeting anyway—this time with John Gofman, of the Livermore lab, describing how the AEC has allegedly harassed him in his efforts to warn of radiation dangers. A crowd of perhaps 150 people heard Gofman's talk in the open air.

Battle of Press Releases

The second meeting erupted into a battle of press releases and televised news statements. Schwartz issued a release deploring that "this distinguished laboratory is directed by such narrow-minded people" and asserting that "unfettered free speech is part of the necessary climate of openness that a first-rate scientific laboratory needs in order to thrive." McMillan, who held a press conference for the assembled TV and newspaper reporters, retorted that "this is not a free speech issue, but an issue of defiance of authority."

In statements made at the press conference, and in an interview with *Science*, the laboratory management has made more explicit its reasons for banning the meetings. McMillan, in a formal statement, expressed fears that an "open forum" policy would "inevitably escalate into the kind of destructive activism that is found on many university campuses." He also said that the lab "cannot endure in a climate of activist strife"; that its physical facilities can't accommodate rallies; and that the freedom of movement of the staff would have to be impaired to accommodate such meetings (presumably because doors would have to be locked to curb potential vandalism).

Robert Thornton, associate director, told *Science* that while "Schwartz and his associates aren't out to burn the place down," their meetings might attract other elements from Berkeley that might indeed be tempted to sabotage expensive equipment. Daniel M. Wilkes, public relations chief for the lab, also warned of the threat of "instant mobs" in Berkeley. "There are 30,000 students down there, and a tradition of activism," he said. "Is the Constitution going up in flames because a laboratory has been set aside for free scientific inquiry and wants to retain its integrity and capacity to do this?"

Thornton stressed that meetings on sensitive political issues would almost certainly lead to "polarization and a lot of wasted man-hours." He suggested that while the meetings might end formally at the end of the lunch hour, the "conversations and arguments will go on much longer," destroying concentration on work. He also suggested that disagreements over political issues might impair the ability of lab personnel to work together. Thornton said that most of the scientific staff probably favor holding the meetings, but most of the engineers, blue-collar workers, and other personnel probably oppose them. "Scientists love to argue and it doesn't affect their work," Thornton said, "but the others are different." As an example, he said the Zackay committee had tried to arrange a debate between people who wanted to allow political meetings and people who wanted to ban them, but the committee was unable to get opponents of the meetings to join in debate with those who favored the meetings. "The scientists were willing but the others weren't," Thornton said. He quoted an electrical engineer as explaining: "I have to work with so-and-so every day on his equipment. We don't agree politically but the matter never comes up. But I can't come to a meeting and get into an argument with this guy and continue the same effective relationship at work."

Laboratory officials also seem concerned about possible adverse reactions to the meetings from the AEC, Congress, or other federal authorities. Thornton pointed out that the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center has been audited by an AEC investigator who was reportedly checking allegations that staff members were demonstrating against the Cambodian invasion on government time and that leaflets produced by peace groups were made on government duplicating machines. The allegations had reportedly been made by a worker in a letter to his congressman. "We have to be very careful about the misuse of government time and facilities," Thornton said.

Ironically, despite the effort to avoid meetings that might cause polarization, the laboratory's 2800 employees—of whom roughly 600 are scientists, engineers, or other professionals; 300 are graduate students; 1450 are blue-collar workers; and 450 are clerical personnel —have already become polarized over the issue of whether to allow the meetings in the first place. Chamberlain says about 200 people have signed or expressed interest in a petition he is circulating backing free speech at the laboratory, and another petition supporting Schwartz's seminar series has already been turned in bearing 84 names. At least three petitions opposing the free speechers have been turned in, endorsed by an estimated 400, 135, and 128 signatures, respectively. The most militant petition, signed by several hundred blue-collar workers, warns of the "terror, bombings, arson, violence and destruction which people of this ilk have instigated on the campus." It suggests that those who scream "violation of free speech" are actually planning "a takeover" of the laboratory.

Conflicting Contentions

Laboratory officials suggest the situation might easily escalate into nasty encounters if meetings were allowed and leaflets were handed out. (One petition has already been ripped off a bulletin board and presumably destroyed.) The "free speech" advocates, on the other hand, contend that open discussion would improve understanding and lessen tensions.

The issue is not yet resolved. Schwartz has filed formal grievance procedures over his suspension. The Academic Freedom Committee has not yet been heard from. A few leading staff scientists at the lab are trying to mediate the conflict. And McMillan has indicated he does not regard his "no meetings" policy as immutable.

The laboratory management seems genuinely concerned about the safety and productivity of the facility. But an outsider can't help wondering if more time hasn't been wasted discussing whether to allow the meetings than would ever be wasted if the meetings were held as desired. And, however genuine the concern of laboratory officials may be, they will probably learn the hard way what any movie censor could tell them: banning a production is the best way to make it a box office smash.—PHILIP M. BOFFEY