

Advocacy in Congress

In their letter (29 Jan.) Lawrence D. Longo and Gordon G. Power have raised some important issues in the matter of science and politics. Longo and Power were moved to write after but "one encounter with one congressman," but their report is replete with intuitive political insights. The Public Affairs Committee of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), in its recent experiences with the current mood of the Congress in general, and congressmen in particular, can only add "Amen" to the critical comments of Longo and Power's congressman, Jerry L. Pettis, wherein scientists got poor marks for their efforts at communicating with Congress. Mea culpa! How can we improve?

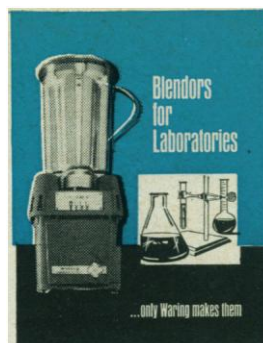
... I would like to make one strategic point. The advocacy of science in the Congress is made best face to face, preferably in the congressman's office and at a time when the issue at stake is not "under the gun." Ideally it is made in an earlier attitude-formulating phase. Let no one, least of all a scientist, poor mouth the educational effort thus made. Above all, let the advocate of science be aware that he is precisely that, an advocate. This is far removed from his traditional self-image of the disinterested observer and student of nature, seeking truth in an n dimensional world. In Congress, things are different. In a world of lawyers and laws, the role of advocacy is the norm. In the lawyers' two-dimensional world the palatable, viable, and durable "truth" is found by a process of accommodation (pejoratively, "compromise") between advocates of a position and their counterposed opponents. The "truth," the legislator presupposes, lies somewhere on a straight line between. Let hearings be held, and let advocate and counter-advocate hold forth. The weightier testimony of the one or the other will lead, by accommodation, to a kind of center of gravity, and there, voila! is the "truth." That may not be the scientist's path to the "truth," but the path leads to a world of understanding and a frame of reference about which we ought to know for our own good.

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