

Letters

Anecdotal Evidence

Letters from E. M. v. Z. Bakker, Sr., and L. Greenwald (18 Feb., p. 705) present anecdotal evidence of the liberal attitude of the South African government toward criticism of their racial policies. Here is one more bit of anecdotal evidence of another kind. Within the last 5 years, an American fellow scientist and personal friend proclaimed at a large social gathering in Johannesburg, South Africa, that that country would be better off being governed by the Blacks. That same evening, a government official came to his hotel, demanded his passport, and informed him that it was to be returned to him at the airport at his departure from the country, within 24 hours. The passport was returned, stamped "not valid for the Republic of South Africa." It took the U.S. State Department more than 2 years to get that restriction lifted. That my friend has also managed to make himself persona non grata in Pakistan, Texas, and East Germany is beside the point.

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Argonne's Role

It is too bad Ann Mozley did not interview responsible Washington officials in her otherwise thorough case study of the Argonne National Laboratory (1 Oct., p. 30). She presents the worm's-eye view of the research scientist, who wants simply to be left alone. Any direction of his work, no matter what the reason, is inherently an evil to be restricted.

This viewpoint assumes, without discussion, that Argonne's primary function today is basic research. We can all agree that basic researchers should have broad discretion in pursuing their interests. But is basic research the primary mission of Argonne in the 1970's?

Or have we reached a point in the history of the atom where the nation's needs require concentration and direction of Argonne's work for the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC)?

It would appear that the scientists interviewed at Argonne are living in a dream world of the past, oblivious to the reasons why Congress appropriates the funds that support Argonne. The funds in question are not appropriated for basic research but to build the breeder. AEC has no choice but to direct the effort at Argonne. The AEC national laboratories are national assets, funded to meet national objectives. They must concentrate on the breeder, which, as the President has said, is the nation's best hope today for meeting future energy needs.

From a national perspective, Milton Shaw is following presidential and congressional orders in demanding a concentrated effort at Argonne, a laboratory which is uniquely equipped to play a crucial role in perfecting the breeder for commercial use. His stress on quality is the key to its success, innovative ideas must be translated into reliable hardware if the American consumer is to benefit.

New research missions for Argonne's able scientists may well be needed. But they make a grave mistake if they resist the directions to translate the fruits of yesterday's research into something useful for the American people.

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Mozley does an accurate and perceptive job of reporting and interpretation. I have heard nothing but endorsement of her article from my colleagues at Argonne.

Central to the problem at Argonne is the feeling that the laboratory's other work is hostage to the performance of work in the reactor program according to the directives of the AEC's division

of reactor development and technology. As documented by Mozley, a major aspect of this control has been the obliteration of any autonomy in organizations responsible for major aspects of the Liquid Metal Fast Breeder Reactor Program, and this has been achieved by fiscal and contractual intimidation. That contractors and laboratory managers are, indeed, intimidated is common knowledge in the nuclear profession; any reporter at the October American Nuclear Society meeting in Miami Beach could have obtained several case histories per hour, simply by talking to people in the corridors.

It is most disheartening that the atmosphere of fear which has resulted has not received the attention of investigative reporters of either the scientific or the general press. The consequences are serious and include unhappy laboratories, a worsening American position in the competitive international reactor development scene, stifling of innovations, and loss of perspective. From 3 years of experience in Europe (at the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna) I can attest that both the tyranny of the controls and their debilitating effect on the U.S. reactor program are already well known abroad. A new aspect is the institutional debilitation which is now becoming apparent.

It is a measure of my own fear that I must specifically state the obvious; although I may be identified as a senior physicist at Argonne and as vice chairman of the executive committee of the Argonne National Laboratory Senate during 1971, I must disavow that this letter is in any sense authorized by Argonne or by the Senate.

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Funding Basic Research

Stetten's editorial, "The evaluation of basic science" (8 Oct., p. 105) raises an important public policy issue, only to treat it in a most unsatisfactory way. Instead of coming to grips with the problem of helping policy makers in the Congress and the executive agencies to decide how much money to put into basic scientific research, Stetten criticizes economists for not knowing the difference between "price" and "value." But even if this criticism were valid, it would not be relevant.