

March 1, 1991 (Vol. 6, no. 13)

Dear Colleague:

Thomas Jefferson, tormented by zealous and self-righteous politicians, said in 1792: "That however necessary it may be to keep a watchful eye over public servants and public measures, yet there ought to be limits to it; for suspicions unfounded and jealousies too lively are irritating to honest feelings, and oftentimes are productive of more evil than good." Our state auditors seem to have forgotten their Jefferson. Requiring faculty to report on outside activities, which most of us undertake as matters of professional obligation, may not seem much--just more paper work--but psychologically it is wearying and damaging for it presupposes that faculty are in the habit of abusing their privilege, abandoning their beloved lab and classroom, for what? A \$200 honorarium for a lecture at a sister institution? The fake luxury of a couple of nights in a Hyatt Hotel where a scientific conference is held? For the larger scientific community, the federal bureaucracies have in the last few years imposed 23 additional requirements before research can proceed. These involve "drug-free workplace, hazardous waste and materials, restrictions on foreign nationals, and scientific fraud and misconduct." As Philip Abelson says in an editorial, "Taken singly, the requirements may seem appropriate. However, the 23 taken together impose a large increased burden...[The] government is implicitly signaling that 23-plus new requirements are each more important than the conduct of scientific research" (Science, 8 February 1991).

Society as a whole shows signs of becoming more and more suspicious of science and scholarship. The underlying reason is that it is in the nature of science and scholarship to soar and expand. Progress, increasingly a bad word in the lexicon of social critics, remains their ideal. Science and scholarship are the ultimate polluters and degraders of the natural earth, for all the material transformations that have occurred on it, can be traced ultimately to their aspirations and achievements. In a world so full of frustration and misery, the childlike happiness of scientists and scholars in their work is an additional offense.

Benjamin Franklin said we are a nation of "happy mediocrity". I hope we never become a nation of resentful mediocrity.

Best wishes,

