

A Second (Scientific) Opinion

Top physicists speak out against Bush Administration policies in the war on terror.

by JOSHUA ROEBKE • Posted May 8, 2006 12:52 AM

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On April 17, 2006, [Seymour Hersh reported](#) in [The New Yorker](#) that the United States had tabled plans to employ tactical nuclear weapons against Iran to halt their burgeoning nuclear program. A letter had been sent to President Bush that same day, condemning what its authors worried would be a radical departure from the official US nuclear weapons policy of "only as a last resort."

The 19 signatories of the document were neither weapons experts nor policy wonks; rather, all were physicists, "members of the profession that brought nuclear weapons into existence." These individuals, including six Nobel laureates, were asserting the parental rights to their brainchild as Oppenheimer, Einstein and others had once done after WWII.



Credit: Thomas Pullicino

The nation's physicists, whether the government cares to acknowledge them or not, are increasingly willing to speak out on the "moral consequences" of the Bush Administration's hawkish maneuvers. In the past year, 1,800 physicists have attached their names to another letter denouncing the use of nuclear weapons as a general policy. This past week, the [American Physical Society](#), representing some 45,000 physicists from around the globe, joined the chorus by noting that the use of "nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states threatens to undermine the [Non-Proliferation Treaty](#)." In their statement, they further called for policy makers to "engage in a dialog with scientists."

Beyond protecting their baby, [a letter to the editor](#) appeared in this past Sunday's [New York Times](#) that indicates that the purview of physicists' critiques of governmental injustice is growing.

"As scientists, we claim no special role in public policy," said [Freeman Dyson](#) of the [Institute for Advanced Study](#) in Princeton, NJ, regarding the physicists' most recent letter. "But, there is a long tradition of scientists being concerned with wider issues and bravely speaking out against injustice. The fact that science is an international enterprise helps scientists to take a critical view of their own governments."

Dyson was among 19 physicists, including four [Nobel Prize](#) winners, who voiced their disgust with the treatment of enemy combatants at clandestine detention centers such as the facility at [Guantanamo Bay](#). The letter outlines both the frequent legal and moral objections to detaining prisoners without trial, but also stipulates another reason physicists are speaking out on the US government's actions: the scientist's responsibility to truth.

"I think everyone should be concerned that the US, without even a real debate, has abandoned our historic principles and values," said [Edward Witten](#), a [Fields Medal](#) winner and one of the signatories. Witten is also a former political aspirant and worked on a presidential campaign in the 1960s.

Despite the respect often accorded to the field, some policy analysts believe that scientists have no special claim to truth saying.

"Lawyers, novelists, doctors, salespeople, accountants and airline pilots, among many others (politicians included!!), have a responsibility to the truth, too," said [Daniel Sarewitz](#), the director of the [Consortium for Science, Policy and Outcomes](#) at [Arizona State University](#) via e-mail. "Perhaps this particular group of scientists is particularly thoughtful and insightful and deserving of being attended to--but that seems independent of the fact that they are scientists."

Others feel physicists should not be mortgaging their societal status by peddling their politics.

"By trading on their authority, [physicists] risk making science seem just like any other basis of power—money, fame, etc.," said [Roger Pielke, Jr.](#), director of the [Center for Science and Technology Policy Research](#) at the [University of Colorado](#). "If we believe that science has some special characteristics—like being a useful path to reliable knowledge. Treating it like any other basis of authority carries some risks for that specialness."

However, these physicists do not explicitly claim that science has all the answers to US foreign policy or that they are unique purveyors of truth.

"We are human beings first and scientists second," said Dyson, in response to the letter's critics. "When I speak about justice for prisoners, I speak as a human being,"

[Stanford University](#) physicist [Leonard Susskind](#), who initiated *The New York Times* editorial, says that a scientist's opinion matters based on the very nature and history of the profession.

"During the 20th century there were many cases in which scientists bore the brunt of political and sometimes physical harassment," Susskind said. "Albert Einstein was a brave and vocal critic of both the Nazi regime and McCarthyism; Neils Bohr was, also. The story of how [Andrei Sakharov](#) took on the totalitarian Soviet establishment is well known. This is all part of the history that every physicist knows.

"I myself had a former student imprisoned and threatened for two years during the 'dirty war' in Argentina," he continued. "Because of these connections, many physicists are especially sensitive about the issues of illegal imprisonment and other abuses of power. Thus I felt it was proper to speak out, not just as citizens, but as scientists."

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