

Science vs. Society

I've been reading again. And regular scanners of this column know that things I read generally find their way onto these pages. (In any other industry, it might be called "theft." In journalism, it's called "inspiration.")

Two books I've been studying recently are *The Great Influenza*, by John M. Barry (Viking, 2004), and *How to Win the Nobel Prize*, by J. Michael Bishop (Harvard University Press, 2003). You wouldn't think these books would have anything at all to do with nuclear waste, but I found some fascinating connections.

The flu book first. This exhaustively-researched book focuses on, as its title states, the great flu epidemic of 1918-19, which killed up to 100 million people before it finally abated. But the book covers much more, including the status of medical science in the late 19th and early 20th century and the United States's entry into World War I, with its accompanying military and civilian ramp-up. The latter was especially fascinating, in that along with mobilizing the requisite military operations, the Woodrow Wilson administration virtually invented the concept of modern "public information."

According to the book, George Creel, the head of the Committee on Public Information, began by issuing tens of thousands of press releases and feature stories, mostly focusing on (carefully selected) facts, and conducting a positive campaign. Soon, however, his efforts shifted. As he told his workers, "fear" is an "important element" to be bred in the civilian population. He continued: "It is difficult to unite a people by talking only on the highest ethical plane. To fight for an ideal, perhaps, must be coupled with thoughts of self-preservation." Therein lie the seeds of today's activism.

This lesson has been well-learned

by every person or group that ever opposed anything nuclear, be it a power plant, a fuel plant, a waste repository, a transportation route. To get people on your side, you gotta scare them to death.

In the other book, Nobel Laureate Bishop recounts the efforts of the University of California-San Francisco to convert a large office building into medical research laboratories. Even though the building was located in a predominantly residential neighborhood, the university felt that the neighbors would be largely supportive of the mission and welcome the laboratories. As it turned out, the university's perception was rather misguided.

Neighborhood activists leaped into opposition, spreading fear and as much disinformation as possible. The labs would be bringing in toxic wastes, infectious pathogens, even radioactivity, the activists charged. According to Bishop, one citizen suggested in a public forum that the university had accidentally developed and released the AIDS virus in a DNA experiment gone wrong, while another expressed her outrage that the university would be "bringing DNA into the neighborhood." In the end, after five years and countless millions spent on nothing, the university decided to use the building for administrative purposes and to build the labs in an abandoned rail yard.

And the real agenda, why neighborhood people were *really* fighting the laboratories, turned out to be traffic and parking space. Spreading unconscionable fear was just a means to keeping traffic low and preserving valuable street parking.

The lesson here? Well, it's not any big surprise. We've always known the activists' game. Anyone involved in anything to do with nuclear waste has encountered the almost craven fear



You Gotta Know the Agenda

that some members of the public hold for the subject. A nuclear waste disposal facility may not be a public recreational park, but it's far from the chamber of death it's often perceived to be. The opposition has done a fine job in terrifying the nation about nuclear waste.

No, there's nothing really new here. It's just interesting to know how old the fear factor is, and to know that sometimes understanding the underlying agenda can be a start toward real communication, real public *information*.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor ■