

The manufacturing of consent

Unseemly outbursts, as exemplified by the letter of R. Karandikar and M. Vidyasagar (*Curr. Sci.*, 1999, 77, 731–732), which are as high on hyperbole as they are insulated from fact, do greater damage than good to the viewpoint that their authors seek to disseminate. In 1950s America, Senator Joe McCarthy had a very simple stratagem for muzzling all dissenting opinion: just label a dissenter a communist, and all of his or her statements become *ipso facto* invalid, and against the national interest. It would be a grievous mistake for scientists in our country to emulate that red-baiting senator, and dismiss all individuals who oppose government policy on nuclear weaponization by the craven expedient of branding them as stooges of the West. The case for an Indian nuclear deterrent, if indeed there is one, needs to be argued on merits and not on innuendo, and all of us could do with a little more of the former and considerably less of the latter.

As for facts, the American Physical Society (APS) is not a 'far flung group', but has on its roster many of the world's leading physicists. Members of the APS who have publicly denounced nuclear weapons, have *never* based their criticisms on the nationality of those weapons, for an instrument of mass destruction respects no nationality. Indeed, the crusade against nuclear weapons has always drawn its vanguard from among the ranks of scientists and physicists across the globe. This is no coincidence, for, unlike the issues of Palestine or Iraq (over which Karandikar and Vidyasagar are justly dismayed), *the construction and deployment of nuclear weapons very directly involves physicists and scientists at every stage*. In fact, at a recent 'Frontier Series' lecture at the Indian Institute of Science, K. Subrahmanyam of the National Security Council made the astounding revelation that the scientific brass of this country had been continuously pressing every Prime Minister since 1983 for assent to test a nuclear bomb and thus, by implication, to 'go nuclear'. If one group of scientists can thus actively lobby for political approval of a foreign (and *not* a scientific or

academic) policy objective, another group of scientists certainly has an equal and opposite right to mobilize against it, especially if it happens to be a matter of such grave importance. If our scientific establishment is so allergic to the idea of such opinions being aired at APS roundtables, why doesn't it motivate some scientific or academic body in India to initiate this discussion? As matters stand, the letters page of *Current Science* appears to be the only scientific forum that is not burying its head in the sand, and ironically enough, is being ceaselessly castigated for it!

As to the particulars of the Jayaraman case, he was denied even personal earned leave and unpaid leave by the Director of IMSC to participate in the APS panel discussion on the grounds that his participation would be 'against the interests of the institute and the nation'. However, no matter how unpalatable the Director of such an institution finds the views of an employee, he is legally bound by very well-laid-out constitutional provisions that clearly spell out the circumstances under which such an employee's fundamental rights of free movement and free speech can be *a priori* curtailed. By no stretch of legal callisthenics does criticism of governmental policy on nuclear weaponization fall within the widest ambit of any of these constitutional special provisions, and the attempt to make the personal earned or unpaid leave of an employee of such an institution contingent upon his surrender of constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights, constituted sufficient grounds for him to move an appropriate legal forum to determine whether this wasn't indeed a violation, not just of his academic freedom, but of his civil liberties as an Indian citizen! To trivialize a matter of this gravity by labelling it a 'petty personal squabble' is a preposterous distortion. It is fortunate that belated wisdom finally prevailed upon the DAE/IMSC authorities, and the setting of an extremely pernicious precedent was thus averted. Lastly, to be ignorant of facts, or to selectively filter out those that happen to be inconvenient, is every man's prerogative. However, to

propagate disinformation and accuse others of hypocrisy on the basis of deliberate or involuntary ignorance *is not*. Members of the APS did officially protest against the visa denial to Chidambaram in a letter to the US State Department, as Karandikar and Vidyasagar could have easily determined from the self-same physicists they have pilloried in their letter, had they controlled their unscientific urge to tailor the facts to fit their theories.

In conclusion, Karandikar and Vidyasagar's assertion that opinions aired by a scientist are, by default, to be construed as being reflective of his/her institute of affiliation, must qualify as the *piece de resistance* in a letter that already makes scant contact with logic, if any. Since Karandikar's institutional affiliation appears at the bottom of his letter, is he insinuating that this cynical diatribe which he has co-authored with Vidyasagar reflects, even partly, the official viewpoint of his employers, the Indian Statistical Institute? I would like to summarily disabuse him of this delusion, by pointing out that at least a dozen signatories of the e-mail petition urging the IMSC Director to desist from issuing a disciplinary notice to Jayaraman were my colleagues from ISI, all of whom explicitly proclaimed their institutional affiliation therein. Not because it reflected the official ISI stance, but because employees of ISI, or any other government funded research institute, have the right to take a stand, just like other Indian citizens, without forfeiting their status as employees! It will be a very sad day when government-funded research institutes in our country get into the business of what Noam Chomsky has aptly termed 'the manufacturing of consent'.

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