

Reflections on the State of the World — 8

The New Inquisition

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

On November 18, 1992, under the banner of the Union of Concerned Scientists (<http://www.ucsusa.org/>), 1700 senior scientists from around the world, including most Nobel laureates, issued a serious warning to humanity saying that human beings and the natural world are on a collision course.

They called for a new ethic that would convince reluctant governments and reluctant peoples to make a decisive step toward responsible and sustainable living.

When you look up the website of the Union of Concerned Scientists now, you will not find a glowing progress report. On the contrary, the gloomy news is continuing, and the outlook is even bleaker than it was in 1992.

Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of today's stocktaking is the realization that the powerful U.S. government turns out to be the biggest stumbling block. Under the rubric of "Evidence of Political Interference," the Union has amassed solid evidence that shows the detrimental role of politics in the struggle for a saner world and healthier environment.

On February 18, 2002, 62 leading scientists signed a statement on integrity in policy making. Subsequently, over 15,000 scientists from all 50 states of America, including 52 Nobel laureates, and representing diverse scientific disciplines voiced their concern about the Bush administration's misuse of science and scientific evidence and called for reform.

In 2008, the Union of Concerned Scientists again called on the U.S. governments to establish conditions that would allow federal scientists to produce the kind of valid knowledge that would permit a government dedicated to the public good to accomplish its goal.

Evidently, these pleas have thus far fallen on deaf ears. Scientists employed by the government have been fired, because they did not meet the government's ideological criteria. Others, with ties to government-supported industries, have been placed on panels where they can obstruct the scientific work of others who are not kowtowing to the government or industries. It would appear that U.S. government interference in science is not sporadic but systematic. Scientific methods and evidence are being manipulated to suit political objectives that are not for the weal of the people.

The Bush government not only has a strong right-wing Christian bias but also one that decidedly favors industry and business, which are often clashing with environmental goals. It is unlikely that at this late stage in President Bush's tenure, he will have a change of heart and orientation. The question is: What will the next U.S. administration

favor? Will it permit greater openness and support integrity? Or ought we expect more of the same? Will the next team in Washington once again undermine the work of those who care for the environment and public welfare and seek to utilize science to come up with important answers and possible vital solutions?

In Galileo Galilei's time, Christian Church officials pointblank denied the scientific evidence for heliocentrism and forced this great scientist to recant his observation that the planets revolve around the Sun, as is today part of every schoolchild's education. The Inquisition ignobly placed him under permanent house arrest. Only as late as 1992 did the Vatican (under Pope Paul II) express regret at how the Galileo affair had been handled.

Today, the Bush government has donned the mantle of ultimate arbiter in scientific matters, which, given the environmental emergency and the urgency of other crises (such as the AIDS epidemic), is highly alarming. We owe a great thanks to the Union of Concerned Scientists and its numerous scientist members who boldly challenge the new Inquisition at Capitol Hill.

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