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## Academic science in the age of weapons of mass destruction

By **Stephen E Bialkowski**

I came to Utah State University in 1983, optimistic about doing research and developing an analytical chemistry curriculum. Back then, students wore bandanas and played ultimate Frisbee on Old Main lawn. They loved the outdoors and wore fuzzy wool socks to prove it.

Now, students wear military uniforms and the blades of military helicopters spin on the lawn. The local press also spins with stories about the impressive military campus presence. The Reserves have replaced the hacky-sack-toting wilderness warriors. Paul Bunyan has made room for the USU War Veterans' Monument.

I was honored last spring with the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters' Willard Gardner Prize. It set me thinking about what it means to be a scientist in the context of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, weapons of mass destruction and civilian populations killed for political objectives. In my acceptance speech, I wanted to express my concerns about the involvement of scientists in weapons research and the direction our society is headed.

However, as I began to speak, I heard a moan from the front row. I immediately realized that we all were horrified by what was going on in the world that day and my speech would have been a redundant reminder. These academics had come to a meeting to forget about the invasion of Iraq for a couple of hours. So I copped out. With the weight of the planet on us that day, it was best to try to forget.

Still, I should have told these Utah academicians how society is becoming more conservative and hostile to science. The last time I taught environmental chemistry, some students were upset with me because I "didn't tell the whole truth." I wouldn't back down on what science tells us about air pollution, global warming and the consequences of toxic substances in our environment.

This is well-known science, of course. Yet, some students take my environmental chemistry course to try to discredit science. They hear on radio shows and read in news releases from conservative institutes that science is wrong. They accept the stories without question, trusting the nonscientists over the scientists.

Students tell me that there is no consensus among scientists because one or two happen to speak out against widely accepted theories. I was told that nobody with

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any "common sense" could ever believe that a few parts-per-million of a pesticide could harm a person. They religiously believed, however, that a few parts-per-million of a nerve agent would be enough to wipe out the civilian population. They didn't bother to check that the two chemicals are almost identical and have similar effects on the body.

There once was growing optimism about science's role in guiding society. But a backlash has occurred. Positive public opinion about science and scientists is being degraded by public policy groups, public relations firms, corporate front groups, think tanks, legal foundations, "wise use" and "common sense" groups and certain individuals. Science is being demonized by those -- even in the government -- who do not like the findings of science.

The journal *Science* recently described how conservative congressmen are investigating the National Institutes of Health-funded research addressing AIDS/HIV prevention, risky behavior, pregnancy prevention and mental health. They apparently found these research areas to be "distasteful" and want the funding stopped. Is this McCarthyism?

I did some research at a Department of Energy environmental laboratory last summer. You have to know what you are doing to work at a government laboratory involved with cleaning up chemicals and nuclear materials left over from the Cold War. You also, apparently, have to know about terrorism. The terrorism training document I was given instructed me that there are four kinds of terrorism: 1) State-sponsored terrorism, like Libya's; 2) State-oriented political terrorism groups, such as Hamas; 3) Global political terrorists, like al-Qaida, and 4) Agenda groups, like environmentalists.

Wait. Environmentalists were being defined as terrorists by those who caused these environmental disasters in the first place? "We're looking into that issue," an administrator informed me.

My environmental chemistry students had already taught me that our country and society do not value science. They showed me how science itself is being molded by politically motivated, nongovernment organizations.

The last thing that I wanted to tell the Utah academic community last April was how science had lost credibility these past 20 years. How could I ever tell them this when they were giving me an award?

The blunt truth, however, is that there is another war going on. It is not about oil, terrorism or weapons of mass destruction. It is a political battle. It is a battle for democracy, freedom and accuracy of speech. And in this battle we need to support the value and credibility of science.

Among the fruits of victory in this battle would be students able to choose physical science careers and to feel good about them. Perhaps then they could work on cleaning up environments, improving public health and finding remedies for poverty.

Because science, not war, is the key to bringing global peace and prosperity.

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