

APS and public issues

Robert E. Marshak

The President's science adviser, George A. Keyworth, takes strong exception to the resolution on nuclear-arms limitation issued by APS Council on 23 January 1983 (see box). His Guest Comment raises important questions that deserve response.

One of Keyworth's objections is that the issuance of the resolution "breaks with tradition and with the organizing principles of the APS." Statements on public issues are indeed rare for APS Council, but by no means unprecedented. As early as 1953, Council took a public stand in opposing the threatened removal by a high government official of the director of the National Bureau of Standards for sanctioning the publication of a report critical of "battery additives." Council's action helped preserve the scientific integrity of NBS.

In subsequent years, APS has become increasingly concerned with public issues that involve substantial physics content or which otherwise are deemed pertinent to the "advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of physics," which is the stated purpose of the society. In all such public interventions, Council, the elected governing body of APS, has striven to express its concern in a thoughtful, objective and nonpartisan manner.

Keyworth's second criticism of the nuclear-weapons resolution is that its issuance thwarted the membership's desire to "maintain APS as a nonpolitical organization." This complaint is based on a misreading of the 1968 vote by APS membership rejecting a proposed constitutional amendment that would have required "any matter of concern to the society" to be brought to a vote by the entire membership via formal resolutions. The rejection of that amendment did eliminate a constant stream of referenda on public issues by APS membership but was not intended to constrain Council from issuing statements and taking actions in the public domain. Indeed, three years after that vote, Council, support-



ed by an overwhelming vote of the membership, created the Forum on Physics & Society for the purpose of disseminating information concerning the interrelationship of physics, physicists and society. (The Forum is not authorized to issue statements in the name of APS.)

A further development occurred several years later. In response to urgings from the then President's science adviser for input from the physics community on public-policy questions, Council established its own advisory group called the Panel on Public Affairs (POPA). Operating under carefully drawn guidelines that were approved by the society's membership, POPA has played an important role in the affairs of the society. It conducts in-depth studies and produces reports conveying the physicists' viewpoint on urgent matters of public policy (such as reactor safety, solar photovoltaic energy conversion and so on), which, after careful review, are usually published in the *Reviews of Modern Physics*. POPA also screens resolutions on physics-related public issues, such as the one under discussion, brought before Council for action. Other APS committees have been formed by Council to address problems that are not purely scientific, such as rendering help to physicists throughout the world whose basic freedoms have been denied.

With this historical background, and with physicists so deeply involved in

our present nuclear predicament, it should come as no surprise that APS Council would adopt a statement on nuclear-arms control. Despite the emotionalism of the issue, careful and patient deliberations, spanning a two-year period, preceded the issuance of the nuclear-weapons statement. Starting with Executive Committee endorsement of the National Academy of Sciences resolution, and continuing with thorough discussion by POPA of a draft prepared by several recognized experts within the society, Council action was finally taken last January.

Council's resolution did intend to communicate a sense of urgency on the issue of nuclear weapons, but it did not take a stand on "nuclear freeze," "no first use" and other currently popular approaches to nuclear-arms control. Council tried hard to transcend partisan politics and to provide a technically unflawed contribution to the nuclear-arms debate. The Administration has announced its firm intention to "reduce the risks of war . . . by dismantling the nuclear menace" (President Ronald Reagan, commencement address, Eureka, Illinois, 9 May 1982). Our governmental leaders should, therefore, welcome the balanced tone of APS Council's resolution and embrace its sober message. I hope that Keyworth will see things in the same vein.

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These comments are endorsed by the executive committee of the APS Council. □

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