

letters

etary Medium, Natl. Acad. Sciences, Am. Geophys. Union, 28 April 1960.

3. A. V. Baez, J. Geophys. Res. **65**, 3019 (1960).

ALBERT V. BAEZ
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9/85

Comment sections

The addition of comment sections to APS journals in recent years can only be applauded as a way of fostering communication among physicists. However, one cannot help but notice that many of the comments take the form of either criticism of another party's work or a reply to such criticism, and in many cases arguments offered by the respective physicists are mutually exclusive.

I find this disheartening for two reasons:

► General conclusions drawn from any line of properly conducted scientific enquiry should be observer independent.

► It puts the burden of deciding the issue squarely on the reader, who often has neither the time, specialized knowledge, nor access to unpublished information needed to do the job properly. This is especially true of comments on *Physical Review Letters*, which are ostensibly intended for the general physics community as opposed to specialists in given fields.

To be sure, well-informed people can have legitimate differences of opinion on complicated (or even simple) matters. In situations where the experimental or theoretical picture is in a state of flux, this is in fact unavoidable. Yet, because all comments and replies to them are seen by all concerned parties (including editors) prior to publication, the occurrence of so many instances where the two camps disagree so fundamentally is an indication that physicists are using the comment sections to talk past each other instead of to each other.

JEFFREY J. HAMILTON
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1/86

THE APS EDITOR IN CHIEF REPLIES: I am sorry that Jeffrey Hamilton finds the form of our comment sections in *Physical Review* and *Physical Review Letters* so "disheartening." I hope that his views are not shared by the majority of our readers. His objection, it seems, is that this practice places "the burden of deciding the issue squarely on the reader" in evaluating which side, if either, is "right" when opposing views are published.

This "burden," of course, is precisely the point of the comment sections of our journals: Lacking a *deus ex ma-*

china who may know the "real" truth, only the readers are qualified to judge "right" from "wrong" in matters of basic physics. I know of no better way of resolving such altercations, which are a natural concomitant of working near the threshold of knowledge, than by exposing all sides of the issue and letting the active physics community decide. Nor is it inappropriate that the subtleties of such arguments and counterarguments may well not be transparent to those without "specialized knowledge." The general physics community cannot be presumed to be sufficiently close to the cutting edge in every field to be able to judge between the competing views of experts.

Hamilton should also realize that our published comments and replies are not simply letters to the editor. Critical comments are sent first to the authors criticized for reply or possible private settling of disputes. If there is no success in the latter route, both comments and replies are sent to outside referees for evaluation, just as for any other submitted paper. The referees are asked to judge the acceptability of the comment or reply by the usual standards of importance, correctness, style, need for revision and so forth, and no comment or reply is ever published without a positive recommendation from one or more impartial referees. Sometimes comments are published without replies because referees do not judge the reply acceptable. (No reply can be published, however, without the corresponding comment.) The process, as can be attested by many who have been personally involved as "commentors" or "commentees," is sometimes long, turgid and acrimonious. It is never, as Hamilton thinks, a simple procedure that physicists use "to talk past each other instead of to each other." One might hope that physics would be "observer independent," as Hamilton feels it should be, but then it would be a lot less fun!

DAVID LAZARUS
Editor in Chief

2/86

The American Physical Society

Strategic Defense Initiative

I wish to express my opposition to the Strategic Defense Initiative. I believe it will prove to be one of the gravest errors of US policy yet made. Worse, the policy makers in Congress know not what they do, because they are not getting a straight story from US scientists. This is true in spite of Representative Marilyn Lloyd's recent assertion (PHYSICS TODAY, October, page 9) that it is "our job to get the best information from the technical community," stated in a context suggesting that Congress is getting it, and her suggestion that we

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