

Berkeley loyalty oath tested politics, fear—not loyalty

I greatly enjoyed David Jackson's article on Pief Panofsky and the University of California (UC) loyalty oath of 1950 (PHYSICS TODAY, January 2009, page 41). It reminded me of my own brush with that oath. In June 1950, at age 24, I arrived in Los Alamos on the heels of my adviser John Wheeler for a planned stint of a year or two working at the laboratory. I soon discovered that all lab employees were required to sign the same oath as UC faculty members because the Los Alamos lab was administered by the university. The requirement created hardly a ripple in the lab. It is my recollection that only 2 of some 3000 staff members declined to sign it. One was John Manley, then a senior physicist. I was the other.

Director Norris Bradbury called me into his office and said something like, "Ken, I completely understand your misgivings, and I share them. But there's nothing I can do. If you don't sign, I have to dismiss you." I grumbled but crumpled. I signed the oath, arguing to myself that the chance to work with Wheeler and other notable physicists at the lab trumped the principle I was trying to stand up for. Manley did not sign. He left Los Alamos to become chair of the physics department at the University of Washington. And he became my hero. Much later, in the 1990s, his widow, Kathy Manley, punctured that hero balloon. When I told her how much I had admired her late husband for his principled action, she said, "Oh, he had already accepted the job in Washington. He didn't have to sign." Nevertheless, I like to think that his opposition to the

oath played some role in his decision. Ultimately, when the oath was ancient history, he returned to Los Alamos.

My own self-esteem was rescued by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which in 1971 generously offered me the opportunity to refuse to sign a loyalty oath and this time mean it. Massachusetts was then one of the few states with a McCarthy-era oath requirement still on the books. When I had accepted a job at the University of Massachusetts Boston, I didn't know about the requirement. I was confronted with it when I arrived. That fall three people at the institution declined to sign, and all three of us were willing to lose our jobs if it came to that. We went before a judge who seemed sympathetic and perhaps even a bit embarrassed by the law he was being asked to administer. He remanded our case to some indefinite future time. We did not lose our jobs. So far as I know, our case is still "active," residing at the back of some file drawer at the Massachusetts Superior Court.

Kenneth W. Ford
(kwford@verizon.net)
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The bad effects of the loyalty oath storm mentioned in David Jackson's article even spread to the University of Pennsylvania, where as a graduate student I wanted to do a thesis in theoretical nuclear physics. Around 1949 Theodore Welton, an excellent theorist with whom I planned to do my PhD thesis, left for Oak Ridge. Some months later our physics department chairman Gaylord Harnwell called me in and told me not to worry, that he had hired a fine theoretician named Gian-Carlo Wick, from the University of California, Berkeley, with whom I could do my thesis.

Unfortunately, several more months later Harnwell called me in again to tell me that his appointment of Wick had been overruled by the Pennsylvania trustees because they did not want to hire anyone who had refused to sign a loyalty oath at Berkeley! Finally, with almost a year of graduate school wasted, I started and completed a thesis with C. Wilbur Ufford as my adviser.

The negative effects of loyalty oaths and cold war hysteria across the political spectrum are mirrored in Pief's trials

and are a warning against hasty actions in the 21st century.

Howard D. Greyber
(hgreyber@yahoo.com)
San Jose, California

It is incorrect to say, as David Jackson has, that Robert Serber left Berkeley because of the loyalty oath. Serber signed the oath. It was a complicated situation, but the deciding factor was the rift between Ernest Lawrence and J. Robert Oppenheimer, as Serber recounts in his memoir, *Peace and War: Reminiscences of a Life on the Frontiers of Science* (Columbia University Press, 1998).

Robert P. Crease
(rcrease@notes.cc.sunysb.edu)
Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, New York

Jackson replies: Kenneth Ford's letter illuminates the weapons' laboratory's draconian implementation of the loyalty oath policy, perhaps because there was no "compromise" of the type negotiated by the university's academic senate, a compromise implying that a compelling reason for not signing might prevent one's being fired. Ford's mention of a "McCarthy-era" loyalty oath in Massachusetts in the 1970s reminds us that more benign "affirmative" or "positive" oaths of allegiance are common today at public universities. Howard Greyber's letter shows how the cold war hysteria permeated even governing bodies of private institutions across the country. Happily, Gian-Carlo Wick found appointment at Carnegie Tech in 1951.

The anti-communist hysteria of the 1940s and 1950s and its political exploitation against academics were not confined to the US. In Canada the lies and slanders against Leopold Infeld by right-wing press, unscrupulous politicians, and pusillanimous university administrators drove Infeld from his professorship at the University of Toronto and deprived his Canadian-born children of their citizenship. In more recent times the Canadian government and the University of Toronto have made some amends.

Robert Crease wishes I had made a distinction in my brief mention of Robert Serber between him and the others who

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