

*This one is from the Financial Times, and dates back to 2006: on the surface a wholly different era from our own; long before the coronavirus and its aftermath. How curious that certain dynamics remain the same...*

## **Scientists have no chance against spin doctors**

By David Bodanis

Last week, touched by winning a science prize at the Royal Society, I gave it to the family of David Kelly, the scientist who committed suicide after governmental criticism associated with his research into weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Not everyone thinks mine was the right decision, on the grounds that science should not be sullied by bringing politics into it. From my years looking at the history of science, I disagree. When science leads to technologies that can undermine the established powers in society, those powers fight back - and they fight to win.

Sometimes that retaliation is deadly and scientists die for the truth. Soviet authorities of the 1930s, for example, hated biologists who pointed out that changing a plant's environment did not alter its genetic nature. That truth undercut the authorities' belief that by altering society, they would be able to create a new Marxist man in a single generation. If there were any exceptions to this idea - if fussy agronomists tried to insist that it did not apply to crop plants - then those opponents had to be crushed. Many were demoted; others were sent to prison, beaten or killed.

George W. Bush's attitude to science is less deadly, of course, but similar in essence. The US president and many of his supporters know that if the public were to be convinced that present uses of coal and oil were putting the planet in grave danger, there would be an outcry to change fundamentally how those industries operate.

Two worlds are set on a collision course. One is the world of science, where objective inquiry serves as a telescope for seeing the world as it exists around us and accurately foretelling what is going to happen. In that world, what counts is finding the truth and adjusting your actions - and, if need be, changing established industries - accordingly.

But in the world of politics, what is most important is what you have previously decided you are going to hold to. Anyone who threatens those goals has to be blocked, for they get in the way of what you consider the greater good. Often that is for the best - just think of any political change or institution you especially like that had to be pushed through against strong opposition.

The problem comes when the two worlds collide. In the short-term, the world of politics almost always wins. Politicians are good at pressing the buttons of emotion, or group feeling, or character assassination, or selective evidence - all the old rhetorical devices of the classical Greeks. Few scientists can fight back. Although in their private lives they might be psychologically astute, their profession teaches them that arguments are ultimately won by appeals to the truth. That is their reflex: it is what they are habituated to do. Against spin doctors, leaked governmental whispers, smooth lobbyists and the like they have scarcely any defence.

There is an added twist. These two worlds operate on different timescales. Scientists are exceptionally good at picking out small indicators of what is happening in the outside world, and accurately foretelling their consequences. That is the enormous power that centuries of development in instrumentation and analytic technique have given them. Politicians, however, naturally take more of the layman's attitude, where only evidence that is large-scale and immediately obvious is truly important.

In my books I have written about many people who, like Kelly, abided by the logic of science, confident that what they saw would be justified as time went on. Yet so often they crashed up against the very different world of politics and established power, and they ended up crushed by it.

At the Royal Society last week it all came to a head. Shortly before the prize evening I had had a long talk with a military friend, recently back from Iraq. He was very patriotic and in no way a pacifist. But it was clear to him that he and his colleagues had been misled: their mission had been inaccurately conceived from the start.

That is the final danger of the two worlds clashing. It was easy for deft bureaucrats and media within the political world to hound and slander Kelly. But not only was that an injustice against a decent person; it led to his accurate insights about the real world being dismissed. I could not change that. But I could help remind people that it was wrong.

*The writer won the 10,000 pound Aventis prize last week for his book *Electric Universe* (Little, Brown). His most recent book is *Passionate Minds: The Great Enlightenment Love Affair* (Little, Brown)*

*[[\*\*Rereading this after nearly 15 years I was struck not just by how much those two different attitudes remain. On a personal note I was also surprised by how much the themes in my 'Art of Fairness' book of 2020 had been prefigured here, especially the way connivers can often get away with unjust actions when they act quickly...but the consequences of their actions, never disappearing, are liable to catch up with them.\*\*]]*