

Not a 'stacked deck'

Academy rebuts Rather

(Editor's Note: The following is a copy of a letter from Philip Handler, president of the National Academy of Sciences, to John Backe, president of CBS.)

Dear Mr. Backe:

On Sunday evening, Feb. 13, on listening to the CBS News program, "60 Minutes," I was shocked to hear Dan Rather suggest that a committee of the National Academy of Sciences is, in his words, "a stacked deck." An annotated transcript of the relevant portions of the program and a summary of what we have learned concerning the circumstances leading up to his remarks are described in the enclosed materials.

The "stacked deck," to which Mr. Rather referred is a committee appointed by me in response to a request from the U.S. Navy, that the academy study the available evidence concerning the environmental effects of project "Seafarer." Knowing of the public concerns about this project, we constructed this committee with the greatest aspects of science and engineering relevant to the problem in question. The distinguished membership of that broadly based committee is listed in the accompanying press advisory, dated Dec. 9, 1976. The chairman is J. Woodland Hastings, professor of biology at Harvard and a world authority on bioluminescence and bioelectricity. The notion that this committee is "stacked" would be laughable were it not for the tragedy that the integrity of the committee and that of the academy were impugned so casually—or deliberately—by CBS News.

The academy was established to provide to the nation independent, reliable advice on scientific and technical matters. It has been doing so for 114 years. The credibility of our reports derives from the high

distinction of academy members and of the other 7,500 scientists who participate in our studies, without compensation; it is maintained by the institutional procedures that we have carefully designed over the years to eliminate sources of undue bias, to assure that all relevant information has been objectively considered and its reliability evaluated, and to make certain that the conclusions and recommendations of each report logically derive from its information and data base.

The committee has addressed its task carefully and thoroughly. Its interim report is surely a model of caution and I am confident that the final report will be a model of factual accuracy and objectivity. Accordingly, the allegation that the committee is a "stacked deck" is quite intolerable. The fact that we were never given an opportunity to rebut the accusation makes matters even more frustrating.

Does it not matter that, at most, only three of the 17-member committee could be embraced by Dr. Becker's remark concerning a "pre-bias?" Those three can gain nothing by having taken their position and I can assure you that the other 14 are far from easily guided sheep. Considering how many other persons and how much scenery were presented, should there not have been some description of the only body of competent, objective scientists who have recently examined the question—and whose devotion to the scientific ethic Mr. Rather so easily dismissed?

What I find most remarkable is that Mr. Rather's damaging characterization followed a very carefully worded statement by Dr. Becker—which made no accusation whatever. The latter's statement was

certainly startling, but not in the way Mr. Rather indicated.

Mr. Backe, I am a professional biochemist. I can imagine no analogue to the situation Dr. Becker portrayed. He indicated, correctly, that experts argue that there are no ill effects from a field 10-6 times as great as that of Seafarer—and wishes us to believe that there are unacceptable adverse effects from that of Seafarer. I can think of no noxious influence—chemical, sound, temperature, pressure, electrical, light, ionizing radiation, etc.—for which exposure to one million times a detectably harmful dose is not violently and rapidly lethal. Yet the very sentence, which might have led the listener to wonder whether this witness had discredited himself, was the one that led his interviewer to discredit our committee!

I suggest that it was reckless and ill-advised to have one of the best-known CBS commentators make such a statement with no apparent substantiation. If the intent of CBS News was an objective examination of the difficulties in balancing environmental concerns and national defense considerations, it failed. By casually discrediting the views of a carefully selected committee of qualified scientists, "60 Minutes" has raised the public's level of anxiety far beyond the magnitude of any foreseeable hazard offered by the Seafarer antenna.

The deck was stacked, Mr. Backe, but not by the academy!

I trust that you will agree that, in the interest of our public responsibility and in fairness to our committee and to the academy, those responsible for the content of "60 Minutes" should issue a corrective statement on "60 Minutes" at the earliest opportunity.