

March 20, 1970

Mr. William R. Polk  
Director, Adlai Stevenson Institute  
of International Affairs  
5757 Woodlawn Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60637

Dear Mr. Polk:

Ken Hansen called me today and made it evident that I had worked myself into a stalemate through some misunderstanding as to which of us was to take the next initiative. I am sorry about that, but having now been catalyzed by Ken, would like to share some further thoughts with you.

The expansion of the BAS to encompass a number of special issues on well-considered important topics is one of the more important opportunities which I can perceive in the area of common interest. I am not exactly sure what my operational role in this might be, and I would be glad to know what thoughts you might have on it. The least I can do is to suggest a couple of topics, and I would continue to put near the top of the list the issue of nuclear energy development and its side effects, which has become so contentious and so confusing in recent months. In fact, I had a very interesting and illuminating time yesterday afternoon discussing these questions with the commissioners themselves, and this made it even more evident that the country was suffering from avoidable agonies through lack of effective communication. I am sure this is a subject on which Rabinowitch also has a good deal to say, but before I go any further I would simply like to know what the prospects are of doing something in this area.

In the same connection there is a general consensus that it would be very desirable to facilitate factual communication on environmental hazards from nuclear activities, in a manner similar to the periodic bulletins of the Public Health Service. Possibly the AEC will undertake to do this itself, recognizing that the press is unable to communicate reliable quantitative data on various incidents. However, there might be even more merit to trying to identify a good technical reporter who could ask more pointed questions of the AEC for incorporation into a periodic evaluation report. I think it would attract a good deal of constructive and useful attention to the bulletin if it were to undertake such a service. I also believe that the commission is quite eager to defend itself against so-called "expose" of information that it was quite ready to promulgate in the first instance.

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I have a number of other topics in mind for special issues. For example, I would like to be able to ask Myron Tribus, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Science and Technology, to organize a "symposium" on the subject of technological risk - to which he himself might be an outstanding contributor. I have been thinking quite a lot about this matter myself along the lines of the enclosed abstract "From Prometheus to Frankenstein", keeping in mind that scientific investigation brings its advances into an imperfect world and we ought to analyze more closely the kinds of stresses that it actually induces therein. I would, by the way, be grateful for any suggestions you might have yourself on ways of conceptualizing this kind of inquiry.

I continue to give a very high priority to global epidemics as a subject that warrants social concern. However, as I am in some confusing negotiations with the Nobel Foundation on this subject I would not want to push it right now for the Bulletin. Since we talked, we have gone a long way on questions of biological warfare and the field is moving almost too rapidly for the Bulletin to contribute better than as a reporting vehicle. We should nevertheless be getting much more news on such subjects than is easily available right now. The News and Comments section of Science magazine does make a useful contribution in this direction, but, with some exceptions, its comments tend to be rather superficial.

I hope these remarks may then serve as a basis of continuing our dialogue.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics