

## Intellectual Freedom and the National Laboratories

2000 Sigma Xi Forum  
New Ethical Challenges in Science and Technology  
November 9-10, 2000• Albuquerque, New Mexico

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**Los Alamos**  
NATIONAL LABORATORY



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John C. Browne, Director  
Los Alamos National Laboratory  
November 2000

As we move toward the 21st century, I believe the importance of the ethical system on which the scientific establishment, including the national laboratories, can build its contributions to society is becoming increasingly more important. Issues include the impact of the research we do, the trust we have between ourselves and the general public and the federal government, and the complexity of the problems that we work on.

One of the most important roles that I see for research management in large institutions, like the national laboratories, is to create the appropriate environment for ethical behavior for all of its employees. Ethics and modern science demands that we create and live a set of shared values. As Bob Dynes pointed out this morning, we're not just talking about rules. We really must have values upon which we build and create the kind of behaviors we want to see. The major issue that I see in developing these shared values is that management and employees must jointly develop, socialize and live those shared values.

In this session today, as I said, we want to explore the issues of intellectual freedom and ethical environment in government and the contracts under which the national laboratories operate. One of the laboratories is run by a nonprofit, the University of California, and the other is a paid-for-profit corporation. I don't know if there are any differences, depending on who the overseeing contractor is. I don't think there are, but it would be interesting to explore any differences we might see between the two.

We have chosen the title "Intellectual Freedom." It's not academic freedom. Although, clearly, there are a lot of shared attributes between academic freedom and intellectual freedom. In our case, intellectual freedom allows our researchers to challenge technical decisions that are made by the laboratory, by the government or by their peers in their area of expertise, not in policy making, but in the scientific realm. It really does not permit them the freedom to roam at will outside of their areas of technical expertise into the realm of policy without clearly stating that their remarks are those of a private citizen and must be handled, therefore, outside of the laboratory business. This is a major issue within our laboratories, and I think one that we try to nurture very carefully, because without it, we think that there would be a closing up of laboratories because of the type of classified work that we do.

The issues that I hope we might explore in this session include, (1) how do you give technical advice to a policymaker? Where do you draw the line with respect to your judgment, your advice versus your opinion, which can change how government attacks very significant societal problems; (2) The issue of security and classification. How does that affect the intellectual freedom of our staff? (3) Dealing with the public on matters of risk. I am going to add to that, also, dealing with our employees on matters of risk, because one of the things that we're finding as we get better with our detection technology and our screening technologies, we now find out about how employees might be susceptible to illnesses, such as berylliosis, problems with beryllium sensitivity. What ethical issues arise when you now have the ability to learn more about impacts on, not only the public, but your employees as well?

We share similar types of problems that Bob Dynes mentioned: conflict of interest, intellectual property questions. And we also have the conflict of interest as an institution. And I'll just mention one—perhaps it could come up in the discussion—is in the past year we had an issue with respect to how the Congress and the Administration handled the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. What kind of ethical issues arise in testing on our technical judgment regarding the CTBT versus institutional conflict of interest? Questions were raised. Were the laboratory directors simply protecting budgets or were they speaking out on technical matters in which they believe very strongly? So, I think we have many of these issues that come into play in our jobs every day.

The security issues raised in the past year regarding Los Alamos were complicated, in my opinion, because of stories in the media that were not necessarily complete or accurate. They were also complicated by the actions of the federal government in not allowing certain information to be made public because of ongoing litigation.

So, it raised a lot of questions, and I think, in the next five to 10 years, the events of the past year or two will actually raise a lot of ethical questions about how people handle classified information, not just at the national laboratories, but in general. Not only the legal issues, but the ethical issues, the values associated with handling classified information. And it's complicated in today's world because the ability to move large amounts of classified information through the Internet has greatly changed the challenge of protecting classified information.

So, let me close out by just saying that I think this is a very rich subject. I made a list of the number of issues that I faced in the past couple of years and I surpassed two pages. But rather than going into any of those issues, since they might come up during your questions, I'd like to turn it over, first, to Jeff Wadsworth.