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It's about time . . .

Posted on May 6th, 2010 by earlehollland

It might not be as dramatic as fictional newscaster [Howard Beale's rant](#) in the movie "[Network](#)" that "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore."

Then again, it might be as close as the orthodox scientific community can get to such a seminal moment. But this week, the prestigious journal *Science* published a letter serving as a clarion call to colleagues.



Newscaster Howard Beale, *Network*

The letter, signed by 255 members of the [National Academy of Sciences](#) –

including 11 Nobel laureates, amounts to the same kind of grassroots dissent against those who deny climate change and the effects humans have had on the process. The researchers are also speaking out loudly against the accusations and intimidations levied against some of the most prominent scientists in the field.

"We also call for an end to McCarthy-like threats of criminal prosecution against our colleagues based on innuendo and guilt by association, the harassment of scientists by politicians seeking distractions to avoid taking action, and the outright lies being spread about them," the letter concludes.

Invoking comparisons to the scare-mongering and Red-baiting by then [Senator Joe McCarthy](#) is more than just a metaphor for what seems to be happening today. It sets the boundary in civil behavior that researchers believe has long since been crossed by those unwilling to accept the evidence of science or the process by which scientists gain new knowledge.

As recently as this week, the attorney general for the Commonwealth of Virginia subpoenaed records from the [University of Virginia](#) about [Michael Mann](#), now a professor meteorology at [Pennsylvania State University](#) but formerly on the faculty at Virginia.

The [Washington Post](#) quoted Mann saying the subpoena was an attempt to "smear" him and discredit his research and the paper raised questions about whether the AG, Republican [Ken Cuccinelli](#), was motivated more by politics than his stated reason – a suspicion that Mann's receipt of federal grants for his work amounted to defrauding taxpayers.

A [recent investigation](#) of Mann by Penn State as a result of "climategate" –

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the release of files and emails from the [University of East Anglia's Climate Research Unit](#) – largely cleared him of any suspicion of misconduct, and yet accusations seem to continue.

The letter in *Science* tries to label such accusations as they actually are:

“Many recent assaults on climate science and, more disturbingly, on climate scientist by climate change deniers, are typically driven by special interests or dogma, not by an honest effort to provide an alternative theory that credibly satisfies the evidence.”

According to [Donald Kennedy](#), one of the letter's signers and the former editor of *Science*, an impetus for publishing the letter and its authors was the fact that “attacks on climate scientists had intensified in recent weeks,” as had “threats of criminal actions” against researchers. Speaking of those aimed at Michael Mann, he called them “outrageous!”

Kennedy, a former head of the [Food and Drug Administration](#), as well as of [Stanford University](#), was asked if such attacks are the result of the public's increasing discomfort with complicated issues and lack of willingness to alter their collective short attention span. At 80 years old, he says, he has “somehow managed to retain my general state of optimism. But it is getting harder every day.”

On the one hand, the petition letter in *Science* represents a small number of people. On the other hand, the collective expertise, knowledge and experience of that group is immeasurably large and impressive. Policy makers will ignore this advice at their own peril.

It admittedly is a part of the American psyche to procrastinate, to put off as long as we can drastic actions. But it is also a part of our psyche to come together and overcome sometimes seemingly overwhelming odds and save ourselves at the last moment.

This is one of those times. __[Earle Holland](#)



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Holly Stocking // May 7, 2010 at 9:15 pm
Give 'em hell, Earle!

[perde](#) // May 10, 2010 at 11:39 am
“We also call for an end to McCarthy-like threats of criminal prosecution against our colleagues based on innuendo and guilt by association, the harassment of scientists by politicians seeking distractions to avoid taking action, and the outright lies being spread about them,” the letter

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concludes.

it is so true. thank you.

[Stephanie S](#) // Jun 3, 2010 at 4:44 pm

To paraphrase Gandhi's famous words: "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." — As far as politicizing scientific information goes: You don't have to get rid of science and scientists to destroy a culture. Just attack the credibility of both and get people to stop believing in them.

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