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Back-Pats vs. Brickbats

WE'D LIKE to put in a good word for agricultural technologists in government, especially those who give that extra bit of service without regard for the size of the monthly paycheck. Many of these men and women have performed heroic service, often largely or entirely unsung. And some of them have occasionally been rewarded with bruises when they deserved praises.

Twice within recent months we have seen (or heard) some undeserved brickbats publicly launched in the direction of USDA scientists. The first was tossed off carelessly, perhaps innocently, during a technical meeting. The speaker mentioned having driven, late one evening, past two laboratories a few miles apart. The first of these was a government laboratory; its windows were dark. The second was an industrial laboratory; some windows were lighted, and someone, apparently, was working overtime. On the basis of this minimal evidence, the speaker concluded that industrial scientists, pushed by the competitive drive and the spirit of free enterprise, work harder—or at least longer—than their less competitive contemporaries on the government's payroll.

It is just conceivable that his conclusion is correct, but surely it is based on insufficient evidence and rather shaky reasoning. For all we know, the same observer might have found the situation exactly reversed had he passed the two laboratories on the following night. Or perhaps on the night he described, the industrial laboratory's cleaning woman was busy, and the government laboratory's was not.

All this is speculation. Our point is that a slur was made. It may not have been intended; it probably was not justified; under the circumstances, it certainly should not have been uttered.

In a more recent instance, we have read another commentary on the gypsy moth spray program in the New York area, and have once more seen the USDA accused of failing to state its case to the public in advance of the spraying, to win over public opinion in favor of the spray program. Instead, the charge runs, the USDA planners waited for complaints to develop, and then sought to provide answers.

In this instance, we have personal knowledge that such was not the case. Anyone who has talked with the administrators of the USDA spray program, anyone who has seen copies of the many notices issued to newspapers, radio stations, and other news media prior to the actual spraying, anyone who has seen the large file of local newspaper clippings reporting favorably on the program before it actually began, knows that those responsible did all they could to prepare the way, and remove groundless fears.

Unfortunately, there is a limit to the number of times a non-sensational story about spray program preparations can be presented to the public; there is a further limit to the number of potential readers who will actually read and retain the information thus presented. There apparently is no limit, however, to the number of ways sensationalists can twist facts. And it is perhaps simply a matter of human nature that a single cry "I've been poisoned," whether true or not, will attract more attention when reported in front-page headlines than will a thousand factual and thoughtful stories about the need for and the relative safety of a DDT-spray program.

We are not trying to make saints of all the scientists and administrators in the USDA, or in other agencies of federal or state governments. Like any other large organization, the USDA doubtless has some employees who do not fully earn their salaries. But it also has many who deserve more than they are paid. Some we know personally could readily find much easier or much higher paying jobs—possibly both—elsewhere. But for their own reasons they continue their careers in government service. From these people, the general public is getting tremendous value for its money.

Knocking inefficiency and bureaucracy is proper exercise, but while we are about it we might also put in a good word occasionally for those who truly serve. And the very least we can do is to use a little more discrimination, a little greater accuracy in aiming our slings and arrows.