

Philip Handler: Big Penis But a Small Man

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In my mind I return again and again to Philip Handler, the chairman of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences and president of the Academy between 1960–1980. For those two decades he dominated and dictated American science policy, and was a premier example of the corrosive consequences of unbridled power, as Lord Acton had warned. The distortion Handler produced in the warp and weft of science still exists today, more than 30 years after [he died](#) from cancer.

The groundwork for what Handler did was laid innocently during the Civil War by Congress when it chartered the Academy as an honorific society. The Academy’s character changed profoundly after Handler’s stewardship began. He was ambitious and strong-willed, and believed intensely that science was the supreme form of human knowledge. By force of his personality he subordinated the Academy to the Council and made the Council a powerhouse of scientific jurisprudence, a star-chamber court for scientific advice.

Stakeholders seeking lampshaded analyses of scientific questions could turn to Handler for help. Innumerable times during his long tenure as the czar of American science he scripted narratives whose common plot involved an *ad hoc* committee of carefully chosen experts that analyzed data and produced a report styled as a product of the committee’s deliberations. Committee critics frequently pointed to the biases of the chosen experts and complained that the conclusions in the reports were foreordained. Such criticism almost always had no legs because in the public perception, which was where Handler and his clients intended that the narrative should have its impact, the Council was synonymous with the Academy, and the Academy was referred to in print so often as the “prestigious National Academy of Sciences” that it seemed “prestigious” was actually part of its name.

Handler wasn't a lackey for the powerful interests that sought his help. Far from it. He was arrogant and hubristic, a man to be feared, particularly by the more than 1000 employees of the Council, all of whom served at his pleasure. Handler had strong views regarding the important questions that occurred at the interface of science and society. He championed nuclear power, a strong military posture, and the healing power of pharmaceuticals. He was hostile to environmental constraints, social programs, and the general drift of the times, which he claimed subverted the youth of America. His views usually coincided with those of the stakeholders who called upon the Council. No conspiracy here. Just a fortuitous community of interests.

Experts on Handler's committees were rarely members of the Academy but frequently were financially tied to the stakeholder. By controlling committee membership, Handler controlled the work product of the committee, like a fisherman with a fish on a hook.

My life course collided with Handler's juggernaut when he was in the process of bending to his will the analysis of the health hazards of the electromagnetic fields (EMFs) produced by a huge antenna, initially called *Sanguine* but renamed *Seafarer*, that was under construction by the U.S. Navy.

In the late 1960's the Navy proposed building the antenna in northern Wisconsin, where it would stretch over parts of 26 counties. Political pressure forced the antenna out of Wisconsin, and the Navy began construction on the upper peninsula of Michigan. The antenna was intended to create an EMF that would be reflected by the ionosphere and then detected by submarines while submerged. Dr. Robert O. Becker, who was the director of the EMF research laboratory where I worked, had served as a member of a panel appointed by the Navy's Captain Paul Tyler to evaluate EMF animal studies that had been commissioned by the Navy, and to give an opinion regarding potential environmental impact of the EMFs from the antenna. The panel did not endorse the safety of the antenna, which was what Tyler expected. On the contrary, the panel warned of potential dangers and health risks of the EMFs and strongly recommended that the Navy conduct further health-related studies.

But Tyler had other ideas. He contacted Handler and the upshot was his appointment of a committee to reexamine the EMF matter. With unseemly haste, the committee issued the decision the Navy wanted—the antenna EMFs posed no health risks whatsoever to the people in Michigan. Nevertheless the committee's report gained no traction because the committee members were so obviously biased and conflicted in interest.

Public concern in Michigan over the potential risks of the antenna EMFs continued to grow. During the 1976 presidential campaign, Jimmy Carter promised the people in Michigan that the antenna would not become operational over their objections. Prompted by mounting adverse publicity and political pressure, the Navy approached Handler again, with a far larger budget, and asked him to appoint a bigger committee that did not contain only members with gross conflicts, and that would be perceived as following a deliberative and thoughtful process for issuing a decision. He chose the chairman of biology at Harvard as the chair of the committee. All the other committee members were MDs or PhDs and, at least to naïve observers, seemed suited to the task. Unfortunately almost all of the committee appointees had no experience in the area of health risks due to EMFs, except for the grossly conflicted members from Handler's first *Seafarer* committee, whom he had reappointed to his second *Seafarer* committee.

Dr. Becker and I saw clearly that the ultimate decision would be a clean bill of health for the antenna, even though such a decision was incompatible with the scientific evidence. The chairman of the committee knew that the members who had experience with EMF biology were grossly conflicted, and he tried for several months to persuade Handler to balance the committee by appointing Dr. Becker and me as members. When we decided that simply was not going to happen, we sent a [public letter](#) to the committee setting forth our objections regarding the basic fairness of the committee, and arguing that the obviousness of the foreordained conclusion of safety rendered the entire process a fraud on the public. The controversy

became widely known following a report in *Science* ([Project Seafarer: Critics Attack National Academy's Review Group](#)).

Eight months later, during an interview with Dan Rather on CBS' &em>60 Minutes, Dr. Becker labeled Handler's committee for what it actually was, a "stacked deck." Handler became very angry. In a [letter](#) published in the *Detroit Free Press*, he said that our charge that the NAS committee was stacked was "laughable" and "intolerable." He suggested that Seafarer was safe, even though his committee, which was supposed to be evaluating the question, had not yet issued its report. The next month we learned that the main government grant which supported our laboratory would not be renewed. We had been warned that would happen if we persisted in crossing the powerful Handler. Nevertheless Dr. Becker had persisted. His fate was to become another heroic casualty in the endless struggle for justice.

Our remaining grant support was sufficient to carry us for almost three more years. Dr. Becker held a staff meeting and told us the date in early 1980 when our laboratory would close.

During our agonal period we both doubled down on our positions regarding the health risks of environmental EMFs. In September, 1979 [an article in the Saturday Review](#) retold the antenna story in the larger context of the health risks of environmental EMFs and the rigging of scientific evaluations of those risks by the stakeholders that produced them. Handler went ballistic when he saw the article and struck at us viciously, but in a way that I saw was dangerous for him because he created a record by which posterity could see what kind of man he was. First he personally called the author and demanded that she retract the article because it attacked the objectivity of the Academy. He said, "I'm going to use every penny we have in the Academy to break you and break the *Saturday Review*." Then [he wrote](#) the editor of the magazine that the article was "willful and venal" and "insulting to several distinguished scientists and to the National Academy of Sciences." The letter included [a manuscript](#) in which he attacked my research, and he demanded that the article be published in the *Saturday Review*. I thought that publishing the manuscript was a [good idea](#) because it supported my contention that the NAS committee had been pre-programmed to reach the conclusion that ultimately was reached. But the editor of *Saturday Review* decided not to do so. I waited for Handler to start the lawsuit he had threatened, strongly hoping it would come. I had battle in my heart and believed that the situation would be far better for me if I could confront him directly rather than have him yap at me abominably from his lofty perch. Despite my fervent hope, the lawsuit never came. Soon thereafter Dr. Becker retired and our laboratory closed.

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I prepared to leave New York for my new job. The night before I departed I had a dream in which I saw the soul of Philip Handle walking in the Land of the Dead, which I immediately recognized as such because I saw other souls whom I knew had died. He was pushing a wheelbarrow that supported his penis which was gigantic, roughly the size of his leg, and throbbed perceptibly with each heartbeat. When he recognized me and saw my pink cheeks he paused and pleaded for my help. "For the things I did on earth I must wander here, receiving no comfort from any soul until my sins against science have been disclosed to the living."

"What do you want from me?" I asked.

"Tell the world what I did while I controlled science."

"Even were I to try," I said, "no one would believe me."

"Please try. Perhaps some enterprising scholar, even yet unborn, will crack the nut of the Academy and reveal its inner workings."

After saying this he turned and began walking back into the shadows from which he had come. But before

he disappeared, he stopped, turned, and approached me a second time. After pausing, as if to gather his thoughts, he said, "Only after my death did I understand that science is the mother of good and evil. Because of me, false notions of science have taken deep root in human understanding, where they beset men's minds so that truth can hardly enter. Great troubles will ensue unless men are forewarned of the danger."

I promised Handler I would do what he asked, not out of pity, because seeing his fate did not lessen the revulsion I felt toward him. On any list of men who have done evil to science and the idea of science, no one ranks ahead of Philip Handler. Rather it was because the corruption of science by opinions masquerading as fact that he had cultivated and propagated was the chief impediment to achieving what I sought—the unbiased and rational evaluation of the link between environmental EMFs and human disease.

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Today the internet and the books are largely silent about Philip Handler. I think this is so because he did no good that could be celebrated, and the evil he did is so big and bright that most people still can't see it. But I can, and I lived to tell what a very small man Philip Handler was, notwithstanding the size of his penis.