Comments on Letters in the October Issue

Concerning the reporting by Science News of Ken Hoffman's views, Ivar Peterson had written: "He [Ken Hoffman] contends that most AMS members had too little information about how funding decisions are actually made to vote knowledgeably." On the other hand, Bill Browder, as President-elect of the AMS, wrote to the Notices in answer to my own letter: "Now Serge Lang attacks him for the (inaccurate) journalistic description of his opinions on the referendum last spring."

I. More accurately, I requested the Council to "investigate the extent to which Hoffman expressed the opinion described in Science News as a representative of the AMS." The Notices editor stated: "The Council of 7 August 1988 considered [Lang's] letter and decided not to take any action." Therefore I ask Browder to document how he came to the conclusion that the journalistic description of Hoffman's opinions is "inaccurate", or that these opinions are "not represented as policy of the Math. Societies." Dan Mostow, current President of the AMS, wrote me on 16 May: "The Executive Committee's information was that Ken Hoffman flatly denies that he said what the reporter Ivar Peterson attributed to him." I called Ivar Peterson, who confirmed that the brief statement of Hoffman's views was a summary of items in a fifteen minute conversation. If Hoffman challenges that rendition of his views, I ask that he take public responsibility for this challenge.

II. As to Browder's statement: "It is not the business of our Society to tell anyone what to think or say, how to do their research, or where to look for funding", the matter is not so simple. What is Browder referring to? Me? Others? It is certainly the business of the Society in certain circumstances to tell its representative(s) in Washington or elsewhere NOT to say certain things which may misrepresent members of the society, or the society itself; and "where to look for funding", for instance as in Motion II of the Referendum (passed by 74%): "... Therefore those representing the AMS are requested to direct their efforts towards increasing the fraction of non-military funding for mathematics research, as well as towards increasing total research support." I object to Browder's sweeping, absolute statement, as when he refers to "anyone", without qualification as to time, place, position or responsibility. Browder thus raises further questions whether representatives of the AMS (Hoffman, Browder himself as President) will abide by the referendum, or even whether they will give it any consideration, let alone appropriate consideration.

III. Browder also states: "A search for ideological purity on the part of some of our members will be highly counterproductive ..." I don't know which members he has in mind, nor do I understand the relevance of his statement. I certainly do not search for "ideological purity", but Browder's letter and statements give me a good opportunity to remind members of the AMS of a concrete case of DOD funding in 1968. The statisticians LeCam and Neyman had consigned the following advertisement in the January and August 1968 AMS Notices:

Mathematicians: Job opportunities in war work are announced in the Notices of the AMS, in the Employment Register, and elsewhere. We urge you to regard yourselves as responsible for the uses in which your talents are put. We believe this responsibility forbids putting mathematics in the service of this cruel war.

LeCam and Neyman for 16 years had contracts with the Army and the Office of Naval Research for the support of their unclassified research in statistics, which had been published in standard journals. In letters dated 3 September and 10 September 1968, they were notified by the Army and Navy that renewal of their contracts was being questioned or terminated, because of their ads. The Army letter stated:

... the results of your efforts have been utilized by the Army in various activities related to the current conflict in Vietnam including your regression procedures as
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applied to ammunition and ballistics problems... While you as individuals have every right to your own opinions and convictions, your present position vis-a-vis that of the Department of Defense must place you in a most uncomfortable, and perhaps untenable, situation; continuance of this relationship could well serve as a source of embarrassment to you. In view of this unfortunate circumstance, a mutually acceptable decision to terminate our present association when your present support expires appears to be consistent with both our positions.

The ONR wrote similarly, and similar letters were sent to four other mathematicians who had signed the same ad. The case was reported in Science, 20 September 1968 and also in the Washington Post, same date.

When asked about the utilization of their research in the Vietnam war, LeCam and Neyman answered respectively as follows: “I don’t know what they are talking about”; and “I did war work during the Second World War. For 16 years, I have not done any war work. I prove theorems, they are published, and after that I don’t know what happens to them.” Neyman also told me at the time that he hoped the ad would appear again, and that he would sign it.

After increasing publicity (e.g. in Science and the Washington Post), and a mounting number of phone calls from members of the scientific-academic community to Washington (DOD, NSF, Presidential Science Advisor, etc.), the Army telephoned that the letter of September 3 should be disregarded, and that if an application for renewal was sent it would almost certainly receive a favorable answer. Neyman telegraphed the ONR:

Your sentiments are understandable. While announcement in AMS Notices reflects my feelings on the Vietnam war, my intentions are to proceed weather modification studies promising benefits for Nation and humanity and would welcome continuation of ONR support.

Then LeCam, Neyman, and the other four mathematicians, got their contracts renewed. I regard the case as typical of the unstable equilibrium of forces between the scientific-academic community and the DOD, subject to pressures from Congress or other public sources. It showed that the DOD did not want a confrontation with that community, and could back down in a specific case when the threat of a serious uproar made itself felt, as was obviously happening after the letters of September 3 and September 10.

Nevertheless, the intimidating effect of the incident was not negligible. Two months after these cases were publicized in Science and other places, I was informed by a junior faculty member at one of the campuses of the University of California (not Berkeley) that a senior professor who held an Air Force contract for the support of mathematics told the young man that he would put him on the contract, which would result in a summer stipend, provided that he promised not to sign any controversial political statements. The young man refused—good for him—but we have here an example of the intimidation which resulted from the LeCam-Neyman case or similar ones.

Serge Lang
Yale University
(Received August 31, 1988)

Comments on Letters in the October Issue

Bill Browder’s letter in defense of Ken Hoffman points up one of the problems with the Office of Government and Public Affairs (OGPA). This office was created in 1983 by a vote of the Council. The position was created in order to “present a consistent picture of the needs, policies, priorities, and accomplishments of mathematical scientists” not to define nor create public policy for the mathematical community. Indeed it requires a 2/3 rds vote and complex procedures to insure adequate debate and consideration of the issues in order for the Council to speak on issues of public policy. The Council could not conceivably transfer this authority (especially in perpetuity*) to the OGPA. Yet the Veech committee of the Council which investigated the functioning of the OGPA concluded that as presently constituted the “OGPA will almost always be engaged in some project which is politically or scientifically offensive, and often both, to an appreciable fraction of the AMS membership.” Bill Browder apparently expands the principle: not even a vote of 74% of the voting members of the Society instructs AMS officials in what they say.

I don’t know precisely how to make the leadership more responsible to the membership. A start would be to make all elections contested. I would be happy to vote for such a motion at the Business Meeting in Phoenix, if someone were to make it. A solution to the problem of the OGPA might be to make the portion of our dues (not inconsiderable) which go to support the office voluntary and to sever official AMS connection with the office. After all, Bill Browder doesn’t suggest that Ken Hoffman’s effectiveness has anything

* When the OGPA was created in 1983, a cap of four years was placed on anyone’s service in the position. This cap was somehow forgotten by the leadership and then removed on the advice of the JPB--a body which included the President, Secretary and Executive Director of the AMS none of whom is elected in a contested election. The reasons given were all the reasons the cap was put on in the first place. The position would not have been created without the cap. The Council at the time felt that an incumbent could make him/herself seem “indispensable”, and that no one person should be in the position of representing mathematics too long.
to do with his being an AMS representative.

Michael Shub
IBM, Yorktown Heights, New York
(Received September 19, 1988)

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Veech Committee mentioned in the above letter is the AMS Review Committee for the Joint Policy Board for Mathematics. The Council of April 1987 agreed that every four years, beginning in 1988, a subcommittee of the Council would review the functioning of the Office of Government and Public Affairs and of its impact and would report to the Council. William A. Veech, Rice University, is chairman of this committee.

Politization of the Society

I am responding to the continuing trickle of letters from AMS members who, evidently upset by some recent actions of the membership, have decried the “politization” of the organization. Unfortunately, even though it may be true that “mathematics is, in and of itself, devoid of political content,” that statement is not devoid of political content. Even an individual who decides to try to do mathematics without any contact with the outside world is taking a political stand. And certainly any organization has a political component, especially one which must decide how to appeal for funds (both internally and externally), how to represent itself to the surrounding society, and how to think about the ends to which its labors may eventually be put to use.

Leo Marcus
Santa Monica, California
(Received September 23, 1988)

Politization of the Society

I hereby resign my membership in the Society, effective immediately.

I joined the Society for reasons having nothing to do with politics. I will be happy to rejoin when the Society has nothing to do with politics.

Frank B. Miles
California State University,
Dominguez Hills
(Received September 19, 1988)

EDITOR'S NOTE: A Letter to the Editor from George Bergman was originally printed in the October issue and reprinted in the November issue of Notices. The letter was reprinted because one point concerning spacing between mathematical symbols and surrounding words was obscured in the original letter. In reprinting we overreacted and put too much space around the symbol “x”. The preferred typeset form in item 6) of the Bergman letter should be

If the element \( x \) has the above property ...

Also, the author of the letter feels that “Typesetting in Journals” would have been a more appropriate title for his letter.