UCD Honors Weapons Scientist

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All around Kemper Hall of Engineering are announcements for a Dean’s Distinguished Lecture. It’s a nice honor to give a Distinguished Lecture; each year, the College of Engineering invites just one or two people to do so. But the advertisements for this particular Distinguished Lecture send a chill right through me. It’s certainly not the topic—Dr. William Ballard will speak on “Lessons Learned from the Space Shuttle Disaster,” which sounds interesting and harmless enough.

So what's the problem with Dr. Ballard's lecture? The problem is that it honors someone we shouldn’t be honoring. As the signs proudly assert, Dr. Ballard is the acting senior technical advisor to the Director of Weapons Engineering at Sandia National Laboratories, California. To translate: Dr. Ballard is a prominent scientist working on USA’s weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). More specifically, Dr. Ballard aims to advance our new, high-tech approach to thermonuclear weapons, where we use advanced computer simulation techniques, partially in lieu of testing, to understand the physics of nuclear fusion and the weapons that use it.

Why would the Dean of the College of Engineering see it fit to invite a senior weapons scientist to give a Distinguished Lecture? The most accurate answer, I’m afraid, is what makes Dr. Ballard’s visit all the more depressing: it’s that Dr. Ballard accurately represents what we, institutionally, have come to respect, value, and encourage.

How could I say such a thing? Well, just look at the evidence. Start with the fact that UC already manages two of USA’s three nuclear weapons facilities—Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and Los Alamos National Laboratory. What’s more, according to a recent survey of UC faculty, 79% of us favor our continuing this arrangement, or have no opinion on it. We run the two weapons labs with a budget exceeding the total budget for all instruction across all UC campuses—a pretty clear indication of our collective values. UC academic programs train a good fraction of the employees at the nuclear weapons facilities—25% of the Livermore employees with a Ph.D., for example, got their degree from a UC campus. UCD itself has such a “special” relationship with the Livermore weapons lab that it’s even considered part of the UCD campus for determining student residency. We welcome joint faculty appointments between UCD and Livermore, and several faculty members have them. And one could go on and on. At every level, from my own academic department on up to the UC system, we have carefully and deliberately forged deep, structural, institutional ties to the WMD laboratories.

I don’t question Dr. Ballard’s legal right to do the technical work of his choice, for the government and institution of his choice. I don’t question his right to speak at UCD, however repulsive I may find his personal and professional choices. What I question is why we, UCD and the College of Engineering, need to do things that help to confer respectability and high social status on someone who works on WMDs. It is precisely this kind of UC-conferred respectability that helps the scientists and engineers who work at the weapons labs to convince themselves that the particular work that they do is reasonable, justifiable, and even of positive social value.

The Dean's Distinguished Lecture is on Wednesday, May 26 from 4:10 to 5:00 pm in 1003 Kemper Hall. The Dean tells me that he hopes for dialogue. I too hope that people might show up and engage in one.

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