

Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor:

... May I also take this opportunity to praise the staff of the AI Magazine for a most informative and professional journal, and one which I find increasingly important for acquainting me with the latest progress in American research.

I look forward to the continuing success of the Association in all its activities.

Yours sincerely,
Martin E. Bennett
Gillingham, Kent, UK

Dear Sir,

I would like to comment on something disturbing that appeared to be revealed at the recent IJCAI conference at Karlsruhe.

The background to it is the "Marietta affair." At the industrial exhibition associated with the conference a Germany company, Marietta, was due to mount an exhibit. It is, I understand, a firm involved in the production of Pershing missiles. Members of the Karlsruhe Green Party and peace movement protested on the conference site, and after some rather complicated negotiations between them and the conference organizers, the firm withdrew from the exhibition.

As a result of the considerable interest aroused both among members of the conference and the general public, the conference organizers made the admirable decision to hold a public meeting to discuss the issues involved and the question of social responsibility of AI workers and scientists in general, an issue that had been in the forefront of the protesters' mini-campaign on the site. The attitudes displayed by members of the AI community at this meeting is the subject of my comments. Let me give two examples.

One of the most distinguished members of that community, very well known for his logically rigorous turn of mind, stated that he fully supported the U.S. administration's weapons policy. He then went on to criticize strongly the local protesters for an alleged threat of violence if Marietta did not withdraw. (As a matter of fact, though this is not germane to my present concern, at the general meeting of IJCAI-83 later in the week one of the local organizers confirmed that there had been no such threat.) Our colleague appeared to be quite unaware of the peculiarity of criticising a group of people for using a threat of violence for political ends, while supporting the weapons policy of the U.S. administration which is quite openly based on the threat of violence ("nuclear deterrence"). One might say that these are different kinds of violence, but in that case one would have to believe that a civil disturbance in one German town was less desirable than a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union.

The second example is of another distinguished scholar who, in a passionate contribution to the debate, stated that those in the West who were convinced that unilateral nuclear disarmament would lead to the destruction of their countries and consequently supported the current arms policies of Western governments, were thereby displaying a full sense of social responsibility, and anybody who disagreed with this view was talking "rubbish." On the surface this appears to be at least logical, until one reflects that it would not be particularly difficult with this kind of argument to prove that Hitler displayed a sense of social responsibility, since one has no reason to believe that he was not sincere in believing that Jews, communists, Western capitalists and others would destroy his country if not checked. The frivolity of such arguments is of course due to their neglect of political realities.

There is really not much excuse these days for anyone to remain ignorant of the basic facts of arms politics as they have developed since World War II, since many careful studies have been published. (For instance, I might recommend the paperback study by nine academic staff of the University of Cambridge, "Defended to Death," edited by Gwyn Prins and published by Penguin Books). For the purpose of this necessarily brief letter, may I just summarize, somewhat simplistically in consequence I fear, what they lead to: No armaments race has ever not ended in war; it is a highly probable induction that the present one between the East and West blocs would result in war; it is almost certain that such a war would make Hiroshima look like a child's game; the most reasonable inference is that the principal political task today is one directed towards halting the arms race.

I came away from the meeting wondering why apparently very many members of the AI community who in their scientific work can show such impressive intelligence and insight appear to let these go into abeyance when confronted with some social issues. One factor probably is the fog of misinformation generated by governments of the super-powers and sub-powers, and by the majority of the mass-media, but I doubt whether that is the only factor at work. At the meeting six members of the local peace movement, who were in the middle of a fast undertaken as a protest against the escalation of the deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory, took up positions in a row on the stage behind the invited panel of speakers: they said not a word, but conveyed symbolically one of the most sensible contributions to the debate.

Yours faithfully,
Bernard Meltzer
Rosola, Zocca, Italy