

from the archives

Editorial note: After Franz Boas published this letter, a motion of censure on him was passed by the governing council of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) on 30 December 1919, effectively removing him from the council. Three out of the four spies (all archaeologists) referred to (but unnamed) in this letter – now thought to have been Samuel Lothrop,

Sylvanus Morley and Herbert Spinden – would appear to have themselves voted as members of the council to censure Boas (J. Mason, the fourth, abstained). Boas was threatened with expulsion from the Association itself. He was pressured into resigning from the National Research Council without public explanation. At its Annual Business Meeting on 16 December 2004,

the AAA agreed in principle to rescind the original 1919 motion and vote of censure on Boas. However; in the absence of a quorum, the AAA membership received a ballot for completion by mid-May 2005 (www.aaanet.org/committees/nom). The points Franz Boas originally raised in his letter 86 years ago continue to have relevance today. Editor

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Scientists as Spies

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: In his war address to Congress, President Wilson dwelt at great length on the theory that only autocracies maintain spies; that these are not needed in democracies. At the time that the President made this statement, the Government of the United States had in its employ spies of unknown number. I am not concerned here with the familiar discrepancies between the President's words and the actual facts, although we may perhaps have to accept his statement as meaning correctly that we live under an autocracy; that our democracy is a fiction. The point against which I wish to enter a vigorous protest is that a number of men who follow science as their profession, men whom I refuse to designate any longer as scientists, have prostituted science by using it as a cover for their activities as spies.

A soldier whose business is murder as a fine art, a diplomat whose calling is based on deception and secretiveness, a politician whose very life consists in compromises with his conscience, a business man whose aim is personal profit within the limits allowed by a lenient law—such may be excused if they set patriotic devotion above common everyday decency and perform services as spies. They merely accept the code of morality to which modern society still conforms. Not so the scientist. The very essence of his life is the service of truth. We all know scientists who in private life do not come up to the standard of truthfulness, but who, nevertheless, would not consciously falsify the results of their researches. It is bad enough if we have to put up with these, because they reveal a lack of strength of character that is liable to distort the results of their work. A person, however, who uses science as a cover for political spying, who demeans himself to pose before a foreign government as an investigator and asks for assistance in his alleged researches in order to carry on, under this cloak, his political machinations, prostitutes science in an unpardonable way and forfeits the right to be classed as a scientist.

By accident, incontrovertible proof has come to my hands that at least four men who carry on anthropological work, while employed as government agents, introduced themselves to foreign governments as representatives of scientific institutions in the United States, and as sent out for the purpose of carrying on scientific researches. They have not only shaken the belief in the truthfulness of science, but they have also done the greatest possible disservice to scientific inquiry. In consequence of their acts every nation will look with distrust upon the visiting foreign investigator who wants to do honest work, suspecting sinister designs. Such action has raised a new barrier against the development of international friendly cooperation.

New York, October 16

FRANZ BOAS