

Defending Nobel Winners from Baseless Attacks

By Gil Ross — October 6, 2015



A recent essay ("[The dark side of Nobel prizewinning](#)

[research](#) [1]") by Hugues Honoré, *Agence France-Presse*, is a scurrilous attack on several extraordinary, admirable scientists whose labors, aside from earning them the Nobel Prize, are responsible for saving hundreds of millions of lives.

The author made some misleading, defamatory and/or outright false statements, and they need to be countered.

Let's begin:

"Some of the science prizes appear in hindsight to be embarrassing choices by the committees," Honoré wrote. "When the 2013 Nobel Peace Prize went to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, it was perhaps a way of making up for the Nobel 'war prize' it awarded to German chemist Fritz Haber in 1918. Haber was honoured with the chemistry prize for his work on the synthesis of ammonia, which was crucial for developing fertilizers for food production. But Haber, known as the 'father of chemical warfare,' also developed poisonous gases used in trench warfare in World War I at the Battle of Ypres which he supervised himself."

Haber's groundbreaking discovery of "nitrogen fixation" to synthesize ammonia from atmospheric nitrogen plus hydrogen using a catalyst ("The Haber Process") allowed the development of essentially all our current fertilizers, saving millions from malnutrition and starvation. The accusation that he was somehow a war criminal because ammonia was also used for explosives is at best retrospective incrimination via hindsight, and at worst well, journalistic malpractice is the kindest term I can think of.

Next: a truly horrendous slur against Dr. Paul Mueller (pictured above), a man whose work helped to stymie one of the world's oldest and most lethal scourges: malaria.

"And then there are the laureates," added HonorÃ©, "blasted by environmentalists ... [In 1948], the medicine prize jury honoured Swiss scientist Paul Mueller for his discovery that DDT could be used to kill insects that spread malaria. DDT was later banned worldwide, after it was discovered to pose a threat to humans and wildlife."

That's according to "environmentalists" taking their cues from Rachel Carson's poetic - yet almost fact-free - paean to nature, "Silent Spring," which painted DDT as a poison to nature, birds and humans. None of it was true: DDT has been among the most intensely studied chemicals of all time and [no significant harm](#) [2] to nature, animals nor humans has been validated.

On the other hand, perhaps billions of lives were saved while DDT was extensively used worldwide between its late-1930's discovery and its ban by the U.S. EPA based solely on the agency's anti-chemical ideology in 1972. Despite this, many NGOs continue to impede its use to save lives in Africa and Asia.

Lastly, the article outrageously continues with this snide innuendo aimed at the American Council on Science and Health co-founding trustee and Nobel Laureate credited with vast contributions to humanity - Dr. Norm Borlaug.

"Nonetheless, pesticides went on to play a role in another Nobel. In 1970, US biologist Norman Borlaug won the Nobel Peace Prize for introducing modern agricultural production techniques to Mexico, Pakistan and India, including genetic crossbreeding."

One must wonder what made this writer decide to smear scientists whose contributions to humanity should never be forgotten, much less disparaged.

On a more uplifting, Nobel-related note, Chinese researcher Tu Youyou, now 85 years old, received one of the Physiology or Medicine prizes this week for her remarkable, decades-long efforts to isolate the active malaria-fighting substance, artemisinin, (also known as Qinghaosu) for treatment of malaria.

Artemisinin has been the frontline treatment since the late 1990s and has saved countless lives, especially among the world's poorest children. Laboring over 25 years, she and her colleagues worked largely in secret until the Cold War ended. They purified and tested extracts from *Artemisia annua* L. (Qinghaoau), a type of wormwood native to Asia, until they got both the purity and the dose right. *ACT, Artemisinin-based Combination Therapy*, remains a key ingredient in helping to control and treat the scourge of malaria.

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