In the U.S. in 1989, an angry public forced an end to the use of Alar on apples, an event that should go down in history as the Alar Rebellion. Alar is a growth-regulating hormone manufactured by Uniroyal corporation. The story of Alar is one of only a few small victories for democratic government that we can recall at the national level in the late-20th-century U.S.

Alar holds apples on the tree longer than is natural, making apples a deeper red and giving apple growers a better chance of yielding a uniform crop with less effort. From 1965 to 1989, at least half the apples in the U.S. were sprayed with Alar. Unfortunately, in the period 1973 to 1977, lab tests showed that Alar, and its byproduct UDMH, caused cancer in mice and hamsters. In 1984, the U.S. government's National Toxicology Program categorized UDMH as a "probable human carcinogen" (a designation that has not changed to this day). (See REHW #530-#533.)

After these facts became known, no ethical person could justify putting Alar/UDMH into applesauce or apple juice, which are consumed in large amounts by children. However, as we have seen, corporations have no way to sense, or act upon, ethical values. (For example, see REHW #308, #388, and #455.) On the contrary, the corporate form itself is a legal fiction specifically created to prevent ethical and moral values (or personal liability and responsibility) from contaminating financial decisions. The corporation was invented to exploit the planet and its inhabitants as efficiently and dispassionately as possible, and to solidify unprecedented power in the hands of the managers of such an entity, and nothing else. As a legal matter, corporations MUST return a profit to their investors or they can (and will) be sued for breach of fiduciary trust. If a few workers or children must be sacrificed to return a profit to Uniroyal's investors, then those workers and children will be sacrificed. This is just the way it is after a sovereign people has allowed the corporate form to usurp its sovereignty, to dominate its government, as the people of the U.S. did approximately 100 years ago.[1]

The basic public health policy question raised by Alar was this: Should the nation's children be placed in harm's way just to make the apple business a bit more profitable for apple-growing corporations? Uniroyal and its helpmates in government had one answer to this question, and the public had a different answer. Putting possibly-cancer-causing chemicals on apples made no sense to the public, and the Alar Rebellion really began in 1984 when apple sales dropped 30% after EPA [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency] announced Alar caused cancer in animals. Apple sales would remain 30% below normal until late 1989.[2]

Government officials learned about Alar's carcinogenicity in the period 1973 to 1977, but by 1989 the government had still been unable to ban Alar from apples. (See REHW #530-#533.) Indeed, government had not even bothered to BEGGOE to remove Alar from the marketplace. Adam Smith would have been proud. By June, 1989, the apple growers were on their knees, actually BEGGING the EPA to remove the temptation to use Alar by making it illegal.[4] Many apple growers had tried for a decade to rein in their own appetites and forswear the use of Alar, and some had succeeded. However many apple growers are organized as corporations and corporations cannot easily do what is right unless it is also profitable.

Our federal government is similarly incapable of doing the right thing, principally because it is held captive by corporations. Even when BEGGED by the users of Alar to ban the chemical in the spring of 1989, the government was not capable of doing it. However, in the summer of 1989, Uniroyal made a strategic decision to take Alar off the U.S. market by November, 1989, thus removing public concerns about Alar and ending the government's public display of weakness. It probably would not help maintain subtle corporate dominion if the people saw their government paralyzed and held hostage for another decade by a single corporation like Uniroyal. It was in Uniroyal's (and the chemical industry's) best interests if Uniroyal caved in to the public will. Uniroyal benefited indirectly because the corporation had been getting a bad name for poisoning children and the voluntary withdrawal of Alar refurbished the corporation's public image. It is worth noting that Uniroyal's profits from Alar did not diminish because its production of Alar did not diminish.[5] Uniroyal had used the period 1980-1989 to develop markets for Alar in 71 foreign countries. Of course a few children are now being sacrificed each year in those countries (according to the weight of the available scientific evidence and up-to-date risk assessments[6]), but those children cannot be Uniroyal corporation's concern. Uniroyal retained its image in the U.S. and its profits from abroad, so the Alar Rebellion did not harm this giant "legal person without a soul or a conscience" one whit.

We hasten to point out that the individuals within Uniroyal corporation are not bad people, or evil. They are simply captives within an institution they cannot fully control. The law of the corporation does not permit human concerns about children's health to find expression in corporate policies if such human concerns conflict with pecuniary exigencies, i.e., the bottom line.

From the viewpoint of the permanent government in the U.S. (which is not elected), the Alar Rebellion set a very bad precedent: the general public rising up to stop a corporation from poisoning the food supply could hardly promote the continued dominion of corporations over the people. Who knows what the people would be demanding next if the Alar Rebellion went unchallenged?

The chemical industry, the scientific establishment (particularly the American Association for the Advancement of Science) and the transitory (elected) government all unleashed full-scale attacks on NRDC, the environmental group that wrote the report on Alar, and on CBS, which publicized the report, but most of all on the "hysterical" public which had stopped buying apples.

The chemical industry dumped money into its "independent" "scientific" propaganda organization, Elizabeth Whelan's American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) (see REHW #534). The ACSH issued 3 reports on Alar during 1990 to 1995, each report accompanied by great hoopla to attract press attention, including "press briefings" at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.[7] Each report retold the Alar story the way the chemical industry wants it to be remembered: a small environmental group using unsound science frightened the public out of its wits and forced the government to ban a chemical that never harmed anyone.

On February 1, 1989, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] announced that new data, from studies conducted by Uniroyal corporation itself, confirmed that Alar/UDMH caused cancer in mice; simultaneously, EPA announced that it was "accelerating the process that will propose cancellation of the food uses of Alar.[3] Such a proposal might, or might not, succeed in banning Alar after a decade-long battle in the courts. This announcement confirmed that government was unable to protect public health by acting decisively on the weight of the scientific evidence to prevent corporations from putting poisons in our food. When an environmental group (Natural Resources Defense Council) and a national TV network (CBS) effectively publicized the facts about Alar in late February, 1989, the general public reacted swiftly, cutting its apple purchases by 50% to 60%, essentially boycotting apples. The Alar Rebellion had begun in earnest. It was a text-book case of angry consumers expressing their preferences in the marketplace. Adam Smith would have been proud. By June, 1989, the apple growers were on their knees, actually BEGGING the EPA to remove the temptation to use Alar by making it illegal.[4] Many apple growers had tried for a decade to rein in their own appetites and forswear the use of Alar, and some had succeeded. However many apple growers are organized as corporations and corporations cannot easily do what is right unless it is also profitable.

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The Alar Rebellion showed that science (and SCIENCE) in the late 20th century can be turned into effective propaganda tools when the powers-that-be feel threatened by the public taking action to curb corporate poisonings. The mass media—dominated by fewer than 25 huge corporations—are easily (even willingly) misled by a chorus of libertarian extremists and take their editorial rants with a guffaw of astonishment disbelief. However, for Alar, SCIENCE went beyond editorials and opened its inside columns to the propagandists. For example, here is how the Alar Rebellion was described in SCIENCE in 1994: “In the late 1980s, in response to a widespread media campaign waged primarily by the Natural Resources Defense Council, the EPA pressured apple growers to abandon the use of the plant growth regulator Alar, an agricultural chemical that permits apples to ripen uniformly and increases yield. EPA’s capitulation to environmentalists’ demands conflicted with the agency’s own scientific findings.”[10]

Every part of every sentence of this retelling is wrong. In sum, SCIENCE printed a pack of lies about Alar, but they appeared under the imprimatur of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, so reporter after reporter has told and retold these lies until they have become “the truth” in the national consciousness.

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The Alar Rebellion showed that science (and SCIENCE) in the late 20th century can be turned into effective propaganda tools when the powers-that-be feel threatened by the public taking action to curb corporate poisonings. The mass media—dominated by fewer than 25 huge corporations—are easily (even willingly) misled by a chorus of old, white men in lab coats chanting, “Alar is completely safe, the people are hysterical. Housewives should stay in their place -- Alar is a miracle.” Cheerleader Elizabeth Whelan is prancing with baton. But the people are not fooled. Partly as a result of the Alar Rebellion, people now know that corporate chemicals of all kinds are making them and their children sick in numerous ways, and that the government is playing along.

No, people are not fooled. They may not yet see a way to erase from the face of the earth the institution that is responsible for their distress: the huge, publicly-traded corporation. But that time will come. Indeed, if the human species is to survive, that time must come.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)


[8] Cronkite quoted in Howard Kurtz, "Dr. Whelan’s Media Operation," COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW Vol. 8, No. 6 (March 1990), pgs. 43-47.
