

# Bashing Science: It Could be Worse

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Others have done it, too, but has President Bush exceeded his predecessors in twisting and abusing science to suit his political purposes?

Indeed he has, even allowing for Richard Nixon, who angrily abolished the White House science advisory apparatus when some of its distinguished members publicly opposed two of his most cherished objectives, the supersonic transport and missile defense.

The Bush administration's reputation for science bashing is well deserved and widely deplored, a frequent topic of irate commentary in the general press and professional journals. This clash between science and politics was encapsulated at book length in *The Republican War on Science* (Basic Books) by journalist Chris Mooney in 2005. Previously disclosed misdeeds are supplemented periodically by new revelations of cover-ups and muzzling tactics when research findings conflict with the administration's political preferences.

But there's a risk of notoriety exceeding reality on the topic of Bush and science. A "war" it is not. Rather, there's persistent conflict in a number of areas, while general peace prevails in others. The depredations, of which there have been many, have largely been confined to areas that engage the passions of the president's ideological base: reproductive biology (and related behaviors), evolution, and environmental regulation, all encompassed by dismayed and alarmed researchers under the heading of science. Otherwise, the Bush administration has more or less tolerated the traditional sovereignty of science, financed it reasonably well given the threadbare condition of a wartime treasury, and paid ceremonial respect to science with medals and honors. The latest crop of American Nobel laureates got the customary White House reception last year, and an icon of science, Joshua Lederberg, a 1958 Nobelist, was among 10 recipients awarded the National Medal of Freedom by President Bush in December 2006.

After Nixon's resignation, the presidential science-advisory system made a comeback under President Ford and survives to this day. The generally congenial relationship that existed through all the post-Nixon presidencies ended with the election of George W. Bush, whose religious fundamentalist supporters and big corporate interests are the core of his political base. Always attentive to the no-compromise issues of the two constituencies, Bush repaid their allegiance in the first year of his presidency by severely restricting embryonic stem-cell research and by dismissing global climate change as an unproven theory conjured up by environmentalists to cripple American industry. When it seemed that the scientific establishment could not be more offended, he capped his estrangement from conventional science by opining that creationism merited equal classroom time with evolutionary theory — "both sides ought to be properly taught," he evenhandedly suggested.

The frayed relations between science and the White House have been further stirred by reports of political "litmus tests" for appointments to supposedly politics-free scientific advisory committees,

proposals for oil drilling in an Alaskan wildlife refuge, and misleading official warnings of cancer risks linked to abortion. Reports persist of attempts to prevent government scientists from publicly differing with the administration on sensitive policy issues — particularly on global warming. The president has embellished his science-bashing reputation with conspicuous symbolic acts, such as an hour-long meeting in 2005 with best-selling author Michael Crichton, a global-warming skeptic whose novel *State of Fear* has been honored by the American Association of Petroleum Geologists. In six years in the White House, Bush's only veto shot down a bill to relax federal restrictions on embryonic stem-cell research.

Over the past three years, some 10,000 scientists — including at least 50 Nobel laureates and hundreds of other high-end prize winners — have signed on to a statement accusing the Bush administration of neglecting and abusing sound scientific advice in the making of government policies. These and similar allegations have been dismissed by the president's science adviser, John H. Marburger III, as an over-reaction to and a misrepresentation of isolated incidents. Marburger, who has let it be known that he's a Democrat — though apparently of a nominal sort — scoffed in an MSNBC interview last year that, "Political tensions are normal in Washington, and advocates seek to spin every incident into support for their causes." He added that, "Whenever an accusation of political influence is brought to my attention, I act immediately to find out the circumstances and how the cognizant department or agency is dealing with it. The president expects agencies to report scientific findings fully and without distortion."

As a former president of SUNY Stony Brook and director of the Brookhaven National Laboratory, Marburger is a member in good standing of the very scientific establishment that is estranged from the Bush administration. Within that establishment, he is sympathetically regarded as a devotee of sound scientific values who is holding down a difficult job. It's a job that the White House might easily fill from the ranks of sharp-edged scientist-partisans who think Bush has failed to bring political discipline to science.

Though it's a nasty atmosphere, it's not war, as is evident in the leadership appointments that Bush has made to the major research agencies of government. Virtually all are of mainstream origin, and might just as easily have been appointed by a Democratic White House. NIH Director Elias A. Zerhouni is a nonpolitical academic physician, researcher, and administrator who spent his career at Johns Hopkins. NSF Director Arden L. Bement, Jr., split his career among industry, academe, and government, and showed no evident political coloration. The heads of NASA and the Environmental Protection Agency are veterans of long government service. An exception is FDA, the most politically sensitive of federal research agencies, which, after long vacancies in the top position, is headed by an old Bush acquaintance, Andrew C. Von Eschenbach, formerly director of the National Cancer Institute and executive vice president of the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center. Of course, these positions could have politically and ideologically worse occupants — far worse.

Can the Bush presidency shake loose its antiscience reputation in its final two years? A step in that direction occurred in the closing days of 2006 with the announcement of plans for an endangered-species designation for polar bears threatened by melting ice. Environmentalists noted that the decision represented the administration's first acknowledgment of global warming as a threat to a species. But in the sectors of science that have been pummeled by politics and ideology, there are no good feelings toward the Bush administration.

