

Science's Plea to New President: Make Good Use of Science

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For the good of the nation, the government's top scientific jobs and issues must not be neglected in the transitional rush from Election Day to the official start of a new administration and beyond.

Of course not. But, in fact, incoming government officials have often considered science-related matters to be of second-tier importance. Which is why a plea for prompt attention was issued by the scientific establishment during the presidential election campaign. Produced by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the honorary peak of American science, it is titled "Science and Technology for America's Progress: Ensuring the Best Presidential Appointments in the New Administration." Basic message: Move quickly and insist on high quality.

Sounds familiar? Indeed it is, because it is a replay of similar NAS reports issued during three prior presidential elections, all reflecting anxiety about politics' inattention to science in the crucial formative days of a new administration.

By natural selection, scientists who take part in public affairs are deeply concerned, often gloomy, about the nurture and application of science; politicians tend to concentrate on economics, war, health care, and other issues of broad concern, as well as re-election. Cabinet department and senior White House posts are, with rare exception, filled on Inauguration Day, even while awaiting Senate confirmation. But the top science job in the U.S. government, science advisor to the President, sometimes remains vacant for months. President George W. Bush's science advisor came on board 10 months after Inauguration Day. Bill Clinton's science advisor took office on day one, but the advisor to the first President Bush was also a late appointee, as was President Reagan's choice for the job. The lags do not convey a yearning for science advice in high places.

Nevertheless, looking ahead to the incoming presidency, the NAS prescribes immediate membership for the science advisor in the White House inner circle, "as a respected personal and confidential adviser to the president on science and technology (S&T) related policy issues, presumably honed over the course of the election campaign, rather than as a representative of the S&T community." Unfortunately, S&T were barely mentioned during the campaign, and if any S&T specialists made it to the candidates' inner circles, they were well concealed.

Dismayed by the distant relationship between President Bush and his science advisor, John H. Marburger III, the NAS committee calls for a number of remedies, including a literal lessening of the linear gap between the president and his advisor. Whereas the offices of pre-Bush science advisors were situated either in the White House West Wing or in the next-door Old Executive Office Building, Marburger and his staff are a long city block away, in the New Executive Office Building. Moreover, whereas previous science advisors held the dual posts of Special Assistant to the President and Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, Marburger is merely OSTP Director, which means he serves as presidential science advisor without the elevated title of Special Assistant to the President. In

rank-conscious Washington, that's a weighty difference, and it should be corrected, says the report. The report also calls for cabinet rank for the science advisor and attendance at cabinet meetings, though for many years, cabinets have counted for little in the workings of the U.S government.

Beyond the White House position, the focus is on about 100 senior science management jobs throughout the federal government, including the top positions at the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Pentagon, NASA, and the Department of Energy. (Unless appointed for specific terms, custom calls for incumbents to submit their resignations to a new administration, even in a "friendly takeover" by the same party.) Sterling professional credentials and broad experience are described as essential in selecting these appointees.

In regard to appointments to the thousand or so advisory committees that serve federal agencies, the report lists relevant professional competence as the ruling criterion for science and technology appointees and sharply rejects screening for social and political views. However, reflecting the controversies that have arisen over the Bush administration's preference for political soulmates on advisory committees, the report delicately concedes that "a balance of policy perspectives may be appropriate for those placed on committees for their policy insights," but not for those selected for their science and technology expertise.

Finally, the report strongly calls for speeding up the clearance process for high-level appointees, noting that from selection to swearing in takes many months, during which the prospective official is usually in a vocational and geographical limbo. Duplicate background checks by the FBI and Senate confirmation committees could be combined, the report says. Perhaps they could be, but in this era of microscopic searches for long-ago failings, it's more likely that background checks will be extended rather than curtailed.

As Bill Clinton learned in his fledgling days at the White House, you can incur a lot of political grief when it turns out that your nominee for a big job failed to make Social Security payments for a housekeeper.

The scientific community routinely appeals for greater attention and respect in Washington. Will it get it this time around? With the economy and war confronting the new president, I doubt it.