

Editorial

Science and the Obama Administration

In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama pledged that “we will restore science to its rightful place.” This raises three questions. First, who deposed science? Second, how does President Obama plan to elevate it? Third, what is the proper place of science?

President Obama’s remark was plainly directed at the man he succeeds. For eight years, we heard that President Bush headed the most “anti-science” administration in history—an administration that abused, censored, distorted, misrepresented, stifled, suppressed, and underfunded science. Conservatives were said to show a “spectacular ignorance” of science; President Bush himself suffered a “lack of intellectual curiosity”; and, of course, the Republican party was waging a “war on science.”

A handful of the charges were true. Political officials in the Bush administration sometimes reviewed and edited reports and testimony of government scientists. Some people were appointed to scientific advisory committees who should not have been. These behaviors hardly amount to a systematic attack on science, and at any rate had precedent in previous administrations of both parties.

Some of the complaints against the Bush administration were demonstrably false. Science was not underfunded during the last eight years—far from it. Annual funding for the National Institutes of Health rose by 44 percent, for the National Science Foundation by 55 percent, and for overall federal research and development by 61 percent in the Bush years. Funding for R&D also rose as a percentage of the federal budget.

It would not be charitable to suspect that the loudest critics of President Bush’s relationship with science were in the grip of an ideological, even pathological, hatred of the man. Not charitable, but accurate. As it was with all other policy areas, so it was with science: liberal organizations, magazines, Congressmen, and writers heaped scorn on Bush, exaggerated his lapses, and disregarded his successes. Meanwhile, motivated mostly by concerns that had nothing to do with science—especially the war in Iraq—many scientists became political activists and used their social status to declaim against President Bush during the 2004 and 2008 election cycles.

By far, most of the criticism about the Bush administration and science related to that sinuous, slippery space where science overlaps with other

concerns, like policy, economics, culture, and ethics—that is, where science meets politics. The paradigm case here relates to stem cells derived from the destruction of human embryos, an ethical and political issue that cannot be decided on scientific grounds. This was the subject of President Bush’s first major national address in 2001. The policy he put in place then—a compromise approach that allowed research to proceed while preserving ethical bounds—has been subjected to unrelenting misrepresentation and ridicule, even though it was, by the end of his administration, largely vindicated.

Precisely how President Obama intends to undo the supposed damage wreaked by his benighted predecessor is unclear. The stem cell policy that President Bush put in place will surely soon be dismantled, so federal funds will start flowing to research that destroys human embryos. And, as always happens when the presidency changes parties, other Bush priorities and plans will be overturned by President Obama.

Perhaps the surest clues to the new administration’s intentions are the people picked to serve in government. Many positions have yet to be filled, but President Obama is appointing prominent and decorated researchers, such as Nobel laureates Steven Chu and Harold Varmus, to key positions. (Chu, a physicist, has been nominated to head the Department of Energy. Varmus, a cellular biologist, will be co-chair of the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.) The new president is also, unsurprisingly, bringing onto his team experienced bureaucratic warriors like Carol Browner, who will coordinate energy and climate policy from within the White House. (A protégée of Al Gore, in whose Senate office she worked, Browner was the administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency in the Clinton administration—during which time she became known as a knee-jerk regulator. She was also, until quite recently, a member of the Commission for a Sustainable World Society, an avowedly socialist organization.)

The Obama administration’s top science advisor will be John Holdren, a Harvard professor who has long worked at the intersection of environmental and energy research. He is a respected and decorated scientist and administrator. He is also undeniably a liberal activist and an ideologue with a long history of alarmism about man’s relationship to the natural world. The most amusing episode in this regard was nearly three decades ago: Holdren advised Paul Ehrlich, author of the anti-human 1968 tract *The Population Bomb*, in his infamous 1980 wager with economist Julian Simon about the price of five metals; taking Holdren’s advice, Ehrlich

lost the bet totally. (Astonishingly, Holdren continues to praise Ehrlich's work. In a 2008 essay, he lauded *The Population Bomb* for its insight, even though the book's hysterical predictions and central claims have proved overwhelmingly wrong.) In his writings, Professor Holdren tends to move directly from the facts of science to his convictions about policy, as though other concerns—such as pressing economic realities—are insignificant.

This is a stark difference from John Marburger, who held the same post in President Bush's administration that Holdren will hold in President Obama's. Marburger, the longest-serving presidential science advisor since that position was created, was a Democrat serving a Republican president, and a low-key presence who believed that science could advise, but should not dictate, the policy process.

The charges against the Bush administration's record on these issues were frequently lumped together under the heading "politicization of science." It is a revealing phrase, suggesting that science is an enterprise that ought to be wholly separate from politics. This clarifies President Obama's promise to "restore science to its rightful place." In practice, this means that our prosperity and happiness depend upon our children receiving rigorous scientific educations, upon scientific research proceeding unimpeded and with ample public funding, and upon policy decisions obeying the best available scientific recommendations. In theory, this means that the rightful place of science is above politics.

Why "above"? This is a longstanding inclination of modernity—to see science as something that ought not to be sullied by the soot of politics. The founders of the scientific project some four centuries ago explicitly envisioned a magnificent new method of rational learning that would reorder societies and remake the world. In many ways, we live in their remade world, and we all enjoy its wonders—especially the medical cures and the technological conveniences that have gone far toward "the relief of man's estate." We lead longer, healthier lives filled with more pleasure and less pain than any people have ever enjoyed; our bodies are sated, strong, and smart; and we have every expectation of more, ever more, to come. But the advances we have all enjoyed in health and power and material well-being do not mean that there is nothing more to life than health and power and material well-being. Politics must be concerned with those, but it must be concerned as well with other—sometimes higher—things: with moral as well as material progress, with equality and liberty as well as prosperity, with human flourishing in its fullness. Perhaps instead of asking about the proper place of science, we should ask about the proper

place of *politics* in a society dominated by science—a society that seems to think, as Bill Nye, the science popularizer, put it in a recent essay, that science “is the best idea humans have ever had.”

We disagree. We are profoundly grateful for the many blessings of science, but we believe it is and must remain subordinate to politics, properly understood. That does not mean that politicians should distort scientific findings. It means, rather, that scientific findings should inform policy judgments that also take into account many other crucial factors. Science does not inherently respect the dignity of man, it does not show us how best to govern our societies or our selves, and it sometimes conflicts with the self-evident truths articulated by that most political of documents, the Declaration of Independence. In practice, children should be educated in science, but ought also to be raised up to respect virtues for which science has no inherent regard; scientific research should be publicly funded, but only in balance with other goods and never in violation of our fundamental political values; and policy decisions should be informed by science, but only alongside the political, social, and economic concerns that, in our democracy, reflect our efforts to live well and wisely.

—*Adam Keiper*