

Bush-League Science

Are Republicans Conducting a “War on Science”?

The future of science is always a political issue: Society as a whole pays many of the bills, and thus must decide between competing scientific priorities; society as a whole endures the risks of the most dangerous areas of science, and thus needs to set wise limits on perilous (if sometimes necessary) areas of research; and society as a whole should guard against those experimental practices that violate crucial ethical boundaries, such as mistreating vulnerable

human subjects in research. Science is a public good, and thus governing science is a public responsibility—one for citizens and their representatives, not just scientific experts. Science policy, of course, needs to be made in light of the best scientific evidence. But values, not facts, determine what to promote, what to prohibit, and what to tolerate in the research realm.

In his new book, *The Republican War on Science*, journalist Chris Mooney rushes headlong into the bloody

crossroads of science and politics. As Mooney tells it, today's Republican ascendancy was made possible by the merger of business interests and religious conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s. Now, on behalf of those two interest groups, the Republican party is attacking modern science—from stem cells to climate change to evolution. According to Mooney, the GOP—and especially the Bush administration—has been distorting scientific facts, gagging scientists, suppressing research, packing scientific advisory committees with ideologues, and in various other ways abusing and politicizing science.

The Left, of course, is guilty of its own long train of abuses of science, on subjects ranging from animal testing to nuclear energy to genetically modified food. Liberals regularly distort science to push their agenda—witness the recent efforts to link Hurricane Katrina to global warming, a totally unsupportable and offensively opportunistic claim. Mooney does mention, in a most cursory way, these abuses by the Left; but he argues that the GOP's abuses are both more numerous and more pernicious.

In making this claim, he follows the footsteps of the Union of Concerned Scientists, a liberal advocacy group that issued a report in February 2004 accusing the Bush administration of manipulating science. The report was accompanied by a statement signed by a bevy of Nobel laureates. Mooney gushes about the statement's "distinguished roster" of signatories and

portrays the document as an organic expression of outrage. In late 2003, he writes, worried scientists "assembled to compare notes" and tried "to articulate precisely how the Bush administration had crossed a new line." They "recognized the prevalence of science abuses across a wide variety of fields and disciplines." And they issued a heartfelt critique.

One need not be a cynic to question this portrayal of pure and noble researchers coming together to warn against the abuse of science. It may be enough to follow the money, and see where these scientists stood before the Bush administration ever existed. During the 2000 election cycle, about three dozen of the letter's prominent scientist-signers made political donations to Al Gore or other liberal candidates and organizations. Only three made donations to Republicans. An impartial observer could be forgiven for getting the impression of a largely liberal list of signatories, led by a core group of dyed-in-the-wool Democratic scientists who were politically opposed to the Bush administration from the outset, all assembled by a liberal advocacy group trying to raise money in an election year. The fact that many scientists are liberal hardly demonstrates that Republicans are anti-science.

As for Mooney's specific complaints, they are a mixed bag. He raises some good questions about the independence of scientific advisory panels, and points out several genuinely embarrassing appointments and decisions made by the administration. He also

rightly mocks a Republican Senator who called man-made global warming “the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people.” Occasionally, though, the author throws a tantrum. Consider his apoplectic response to a few modest comments President Bush’s reelection campaign made about climate change and scientific uncertainty. “Such flagrant misrepresentation,” Mooney writes, “goes far beyond mere dishonesty. It demonstrates a gross disregard for the welfare of the American public, whom Bush represents, and for the population of the entire globe, whose fate depends in large measure on the behavior of the American behemoth.”

This political temperament sometimes clouds Mooney’s journalistic judgment. For example, his attempt to depict the recent fights over obesity and sugar consumption as strictly partisan is unreasonable. He doesn’t mention that more than four dozen House Democrats joined the Republicans last year in voting to protect food companies from obesity-related lawsuits. Nor does he mention that the sugar industry, which he accuses of “brass-knuckles tactics” in challenging a report on obesity, has donated more money to Democrats than to Republicans in seven of the last eight election cycles.

Mooney’s argument is at its weakest on stem cell research. He wrongly claims that President Bush committed “one of the most flagrant purely scientific deceptions ever perpetrated by a U.S. president on an unsuspecting public” when he said, in his stem cell

address of August 2001, that “more than sixty genetically diverse stem cell lines already exist.” In fact, the figure Bush cited was the best estimate available at the time, and while Mooney makes vague insinuations, neither he nor anyone else has offered any actual reason to think the number (provided to Bush by the National Institutes of Health after a global survey of stem-cell scientists) was manipulated.

More important, Mooney ignores the pro-science motivation of Bush’s policy. Far from arguing against stem cell research, Bush insisted that means could be found to pursue it in ways that raised no ethical problems. His administration was the first to fund embryonic stem cell research—though the Clinton administration was ready to do so more liberally before it left office—and his approach sought primarily to avert a collision between science and ethics. It has done just that. Spurred in large part by this policy, scientists have sought ways to derive pluripotent stem cells without destroying human embryos, and major advances in this direction have been announced this year, vindicating Bush’s view that American scientists had the ingenuity to get around the moral problem.

Mooney also falsely says that pro-lifers think embryos deserve “the same moral and legal protections as fully developed human beings.” In fact, most pro-lifers are more subtle, arguing simply that embryos deserve the most minimal of all legal protections: protection from being intentionally killed.

But more fundamentally, Mooney seems utterly incapable of grasping the serious ethical qualms that some conservatives (and liberals) have about certain biotechnologies. He fails to grasp that intelligent people can be “pro-science” while seeking to limit certain areas of science, and that one might seek such limits precisely to defend and preserve the dignity of the scientific enterprise.

For all the book’s shortcomings, a few of its themes and conclusions are essentially correct. He is right to point out the sorry state of science journalism today. And he is right to call for the re-establishment of the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), the congressional agency that Republicans abolished when they took over the House and Senate a decade ago. The agency was shut down for budgetary and political reasons that may have seemed sensible at the time; in retrospect, it was an improvident decision that left the legislative branch without its own in-house source for scientific expertise. The rigorous analysis provided by a reconstituted OTA would improve congressional understanding of a great many policy areas where ignorance can be costly.

There is one passage in Mooney’s book that is so misguided that it must not go unremarked. Although it takes us far afield from the nitty-gritty of politicized science, it reveals the depth of Mooney’s misunderstanding of the Right. In attempting to explain the source of what he considers the Republican antipathy toward science,

Mooney dips his toe into political philosophy—and almost drowns:

“At its most basic level, the modern Right’s tension with science springs from conservatism, a political philosophy that generally resists change. The dynamism of science—its constant onslaught on old orthodoxies, its rapid generation of new technological possibilities—presents an obvious challenge to more static worldviews. From Galileo to Darwin and beyond, this conflict has played out repeatedly over the course of history. Consider conservative thinker Edmund Burke’s famous denunciation of the Enlightenment as an age of ‘sophisters, economists, and calculators’ in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Perhaps no line better captures the tension between conservatism as a political philosophy and the dynamism of scientific inquiry.”

First, the quotation from Burke is not at all a denunciation of the Enlightenment. In context, Burke is lamenting the decline of chivalry and condemning the treatment of Marie Antoinette at the hands of the revolutionaries. His target is the violent radicalism of the French Revolution, the “revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions.” No reader of Burke, moreover, could argue that he advocated a philosophy that “generally resists change.”

Second, and more important, Mooney here confuses conservative philosophy with crude misoneism. Conservatives, especially in America, embrace modern science and enjoy the fruits of technological innovation. Conservatives on

the whole are likely more friendly to technology than are liberals in America. But the wisest conservatives (and liberals) also recognize the reality of human limits, and seek to promote human virtues and preserve human

goods for generations to come. Science can bring us a better tomorrow only if we don't lose sight of what's best about today. But perhaps this is too subtle for an ambitious writer dreaming of the bestseller list.