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CURRENT ISSUE

Echo Chamber Of Secrets

How science policy is being made by politicized science.

STEPHAN HERRERA

Just days before he was elected president, George W. Bush was asked his opinion on evolution by the *New York Times*, and he said that the “jury is still out.” Since this came from a professed evangelical Christian—a born-again—pundits took it in stride. Scientists, famous for not noticing politics until it rubs them the wrong way, totally ignored it. Three years on now, they’re sounding an alarm.

They say that President Bush has been using hand-picked scientists and science advisers to advance his moral and political agenda—especially in the realm of medicine and biotechnology. They fear that if the president is elected to a second term, he’ll become even more aggressive in his quest to neutralize the power of science in casting public policy—except where it can be manipulated to advance his own plans. It is an open secret that the president is particularly keen to sew up in a second term what he started in his first, and if he’s successful, Americans can expect to see changes in everything from the way medical research is funded to the availability of essential medicines.

Why all the fear and trembling? Because for someone who is not a man of science, President Bush knows how to work the endpoints. He understands the powerful role that science advisers play in policy making. His moral certitude is unshakable. In a presidency, these traits and beliefs make an especially powerful amalgam.

The first signs

Early in his term, President Bush informed the world that the United States was pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol to reduce global warming. He justified his move by maintaining that there was not sufficient research to support the present draconian protocols aimed at reducing industrial output of greenhouse gases—despite the position of the international scientific community. He stated that there was an “incomplete state of scientific knowledge of the causes of, and solutions to, global climate change.”¹

President Bush ignored environment impact studies and a consensus of hearings, and reopened National Forest land that the Clinton administratic had closed to logging and energy exploration.

Mike

Dombeck, then chief of the Forest Service, said that President Bush’s actions “undermine the most extensive multiyear environmental analysis in history, a process that included over 600 public meetings and generated 1.6 million



1 Revkin, A.C. (March 17, 2001) Bush’s shift could doom air pact, some say. *The New York Times*.

✉ EMAIL

comments, the overwhelming majority of which supported protecting roadless areas.” In protest to the administration’s forest policies, Dr. Dombeck resigned in March 2001.

When President Bush slapped a de facto moratorium on federal funding of stem cell research, he did so despite the pleadings of no fewer than 80 organizations, including the American Medical Association, the Alliance for Aging Research, and a group of 40 Nobel laureates; even Nancy Reagan asked him to reconsider. “This issue forces us to confront fundamental questions about the beginnings of life and the ends of science,” President Bush replied, adding that this is a slippery slope: “Researchers are telling us the next step could be to clone human beings to create individual designer stem cells, essentially to grow another you, to be available in case you need another heart or lung or liver.” It was the whispers of his advisers, not the testimony from mainstream scientists, that provoked this apocalyptic vision.

Some believe that the White House was behind the National Cancer Institute’s 2002 decision to remove from its Web site text reading that “recent large studies” showed no connection between abortion and cancer. Ditto for the move by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to neuter information about studies that found no connection between education about condom use and increased sexual activity, and a strong connection between condom use and protection from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.² More worrisome still is Washington’s tinkering with advisory panels, particularly those that counsel the government on regulatory approval of drugs, and on oversight and funding of medical research.

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² Clymer, A. (December 27, 2002) U.S. revises sex information, and a fight goes on. *The New York Times*.

 *Business, Economics, and Policy*

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