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Does the President's Science Adviser Have an Audience?

ERIN HEATH

Much ink has been spilled about how the current Bush administration has used—or, in the opinion of some, abused—science. Critics point to a handful of well-trod examples: Bush's public embrace of the intelligent design movement's "teach the controversy" mantra (although there is no controversy among scientists about the validity and applicability of evolution). The administration's efforts to downplay research pointing to the human causes of climate change. And Bush's choice to disallow federal funding of research on new stem cell lines.

Congressional Democrats and groups such as the Union of Concerned Scientists have introduced legislation and reports questioning the integrity of Bush administration science policy. Officials from the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) have countered by pointing to achievements: a record high spending level on federal research and development (R&D); the completion of the drive, begun under Clinton's watch, to double the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH); and the promotion of innovation initiatives such as the Vision for Space Exploration. Among the questions this tug-of-war has prompted is whether the presidential science adviser—a position that was designed to help ensure scientific integrity in the White House—has any influence over the Bush administration's science policy.

The presidential science adviser position, which is currently held by John H. Marburger III, started with the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who presided over the dawning of America's space race with the Soviet Union. At this time, according to *Cardinal Choices*, historian Gregg Herken's book on the role that scientists have played in advising presidents, scientists enjoyed influence

in formulating federal policy. But during the Vietnam War, some scientists railed against the government's involvement in the conflict; Nixon, angered by opposition to his antiballistic missile program and other policies, abolished the White House science adviser position.

Yet three years later, in a move characteristic of the ebb and flow of science advisers' influence, President Ford reinstalled the science adviser post and introduced the OSTP. And though scientists' influence did not seem to be keenly felt under Reagan, who publicly cast doubt on the theory of evolution, science again made some strides under Presidents George H. W. Bush and Clinton as government efforts like the Human Genome Project flourished.

More recently, President George W. Bush caused some consternation in the scientific community when he took five months during the first year of his tenure to name Marburger as science adviser—a fact that detractors seized on, particularly because the president dealt early with stem cells and global warming, among other issues on which a science adviser's counsel might prove useful. Bush also did not offer Marburger the title of "assistant to the president," a title that often goes to high-ranking White House officials, and one that had been applied to science advisers under Presidents Clinton and George H. W. Bush. Moreover, in a city where proximity equals power, the OSTP was moved from the White House to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building next door. For critics, these actions amounted to a rebuff of science. To add insult to perceived injury, the president's first budget flat-lined or cut nondefense scientific R&D spending, except for the aforementioned hike in NIH's funding.

Scientists noticed. When members of a group calling themselves Scientists and Engineers for Change assembled to campaign against the president last year, the first beef they listed on their Web site was the "downgrading" of the presidential science adviser. Member D. James Baker, head of the Academy of Natural Sciences (and former administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), says that "the administration has backed away from listening to the science adviser position"; the consequences include poor natural disaster preparation and "letting other countries take the lead" on medical breakthroughs.

The question of OSTP's influence remains important now that Bush has publicly supported the teaching of intelligent design. Marburger has consistently defended the administration's stance on science, but he has made it clear that he sees evolution as the "cornerstone of modern biology," stating that "intelligent design is not a scientific concept." Though teaching evolution in public schools is not traditionally a federal policy issue, the president's comments matter, and scientists will be waiting to find out whether Marburger's views have any discernible impact on public policy.

Scientific knowledge and expertise can serve to inform policymaking—and many people believe scientific knowledge *should* play such a role—but only if the policymakers are listening. As Neal Lane, a science adviser for the Clinton administration, told the *New York Times* this summer, "Your influence depends on whether people around the president feel you have something to add."

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