

New Year, New Administration, New Opportunities

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BioScience

Organisms from Molecules to the Environment
American Institute of Biological Sciences

New Year, New Administration, New Opportunities

The economy took a nose-dive in the fall of 2008, with all indicators showing a free fall: inflation at nearly 6 percent—its highest level in 17 years—unemployment at 6 percent, no net job growth in the private sector for most of 2008, plummeting housing prices, and record losses in the banking industry. Public investments in technology, a major component of which is the Internet, have reaped huge benefits for the economy in the past. Remember, however, that it is science that supports the technology we need to keep America great in the 21st century.

Within a few short years, an estimated seven billion people will populate the planet, and all of them will need food, shelter, and water. Natural resources are dwindling, and the challenges of achieving energy security, assuring good quality of life in old age, securing safe water to drink, finding workable responses to climate change, and protecting public health will loom large. None of these challenges can be met without developing and employing new technologies.

Again, remember: science fuels technology through creative inspiration and innovation. Strengthening the science enterprise in the United States will ensure this country's continued leadership in the global community. But this cannot happen unless integrity is restored to US science policy, significant investments are made in fundamental research, a national commitment is made to science education—from K-12 to our research universities—and the public's understanding and appreciation of the nature of science and its contributions to the quality of life are fully realized. Academic research depends on the support of the government and the general public alike, in coordination with government policies that stimulate the creation of new companies, ensure healthy markets, and mitigate risks and barriers.

A US intelligence report for the next president, previewed in a speech by analyst Thomas Fingar, predicts that US dominance will diminish as the world is reshaped by globalization, battered by climate change, and destabilized by regional upheavals over shortages of food, water, and energy (www.dni.gov/speeches/20080904_speech.pdf). Another report issued by the National Academies (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine), *Science and Technology for America's Progress: Ensuring the Best Presidential Appointments in the New Administration* (www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12481#toc), indicates that "the nation is in need of exceptionally able scientists, engineers, and health professionals to serve in executive positions in the federal government." Approximately 80 high-level science and technology appointees will be critical to advising the new president on issues from energy to health care to economic growth.

The message and action plans for America are clear: fund basic research well and appoint outstanding talent to critical posts in government to guide and nurture science, engineering, and technology. Scientific disciplines and associations must break through their traditional walls and work together to help meet this challenge. The American Institute of Biological Sciences stands ready to join forces with other like-minded parties in this crucial effort. The needs are clear and the mantra of the forces we are struggling against is all too familiar. Let us see that the message is heard and needed actions are taken.

RITA R. COLWELL
President, AIBS

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