Science Advice for the Next President

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Science Advice for the Next President

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Next month, voters will choose the next president of the United States. Whether they elect Senator Obama or Senator McCain, the president's responses in coming years to national and global problems and opportunities will require access to scientific and technical expertise. Science and technology (S&T) policy organizations are thus working to provide recommendations and advice to both campaigns as they are undoubtedly already considering candidates for senior administration posts.

Many scientists believe that the current Bush administration has marginalized or ignored science. "I think many people feel that science has been politicized...especially in the areas of climate change, stem cells, and energy," said Samuel M. Rankin III, associate executive director of the American Mathematical Society. What science and public policy organizations are therefore attempting to communicate to Senators McCain and Obama is that S&T must be elevated in the next administration, and S&T knowledge must be considered—in a visible way—in the policymaking process. Some organizations want the next president to make the selection of a science adviser a high priority—indeed, to nominate their choice for Senate confirmation within months of the election.

As former Indiana representative Lee H. Hamilton said: "There is a need to strengthen the relationship between scientists and policymakers. I can't overstate the importance of strengthening the dialogue." Hamilton now directs the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. The Wilson Center is among the organizations working to provide guidance to the next president. Earlier this year, the center gave each presidential campaign *Critical Upgrade: Enhanced Capacity for White House Science and Technology Policymaking,* a 28-page report summarizing the reasons for a strong White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and a robust scientific advisory process.

Informed by interviews and comments from past presidential science advisers, senior White House personnel, and others involved with Democratic and Republican administrations, *Critical Upgrade* articulates the importance of S&T to the nation. It also reminds the next president that in fiscal year 2008, federal investments in S&T research and development were roughly $142 billion. To strategically and efficiently manage this investment, set priorities, and provide resources and policy to address our most pressing challenges, *Critical Upgrade* argues that the White House's S&T policymaking capacity must be enhanced. For the president to deal effectively with key issues—from energy and the environment to national security and the ability of the United States to compete and collaborate internationally—a robust S&T advisory structure through the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy is essential.

Critical Upgrade makes several important recommendations: (a) the next president should quickly appoint an assistant to the president for science and technology policy, a nationally respected leader who will serve at the cabinet level; (b) the Office of Science and Technology Policy should be funded adequately, staffed fully, and integrated closely with other policymaking bodies within the White House; and (c) robust mechanisms should be established and maintained to obtain expert and timely advice.

Rankin agrees with much of the report. "One thing that is apparent is that many former science advisers are available to share their expertise and counsel," he said.

Many science policy advocates in Washington, DC, further note the importance of quick and respected appointments to senior S&T positions. One long-time science-policy watcher reflected on President George W. Bush's commitment to S&T research and development: "This administration did not show any support for science until the second term when ACI [American Competitiveness Initiative] was introduced. I believe that this happened because of pressure from industry." Some attribute this scramble to the phlegmatic pace with which senior S&T officials were appointed during Bush's first term.

Rankin and others assert that a quick appointment of a respected science adviser could lay the groundwork for a steady and strategic federal science policy. A case study for how a strong science adviser could shape policy can be drawn from testimony Rankin gave to the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee earlier this year. He said that the United States must make adequate yearly investments in research, and these investments must be stable over the long term. "Dependable increases allow for planning, infrastructure development, feasible expectations, a manageable pipeline of graduate and postdoctoral students," Rankin said. Current budgeting practices jeopardize jobs and opportunities for researchers, and have a tendency to create imbalances in the US science portfolio.

The new president will be sworn into office in January 2009. The S&T community will be watching closely to see whether rhetorical flourishes about the importance of science to public policy decisionmaking translate into a prominent place at the table for science in the next White House.

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