

Top US scientists blast Bush administration

Jamie Chapman
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In a statement issued February 18, more than 60 highly respected American scientists, including 20 Nobel Prize winners, blasted the Bush administration for suppressing and manipulating scientific evidence in order to promote a predetermined agenda. Entitled “Restoring Scientific Integrity in Policymaking,” the statement charges: “When scientific knowledge has been found to be in conflict with its political goals, the administration has often manipulated the process through which science enters into its decisions.”

Accompanying the statement was a 38-page report from the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) providing a detailed analysis of the Bush administration’s methods. These include appointing people to scientific advisory panels based on their political views rather than on professional qualifications; closing down existing advisory committees; “censoring and suppressing reports by the government’s own scientists”; and “simply not seeking independent scientific advice.”

Most of the instances cited in the report had been discussed previously in the media. By bringing together repeated examples of the Bush administration riding roughshod over science, and by supplementing published accounts with interviews with some of the scientists involved, the report establishes a systematic pattern not seen under previous administrations. As one of the signers, Russell Train, who headed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) during the Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford years, put it: “How radically we have moved away from regulation based on independent findings and professional analysis of scientific, health and economic data by the responsible agency to regulation controlled by the White House and driven primarily by political considerations.”

The report first looks at last June’s well-publicized White House efforts to redraft sections of the EPA’s *Report on the Environment* dealing with global warming. Major amendments demanded included the deletion of a 1,000-year temperature chart and its replacement with, according to an internal EPA memo, “a recent, limited analysis [that] supports the administration’s favored message”; the deletion of any reference to a recent National Academy of Sciences report—one ordered by the Bush White House itself—that confirmed the role of human activity in climate change; and the elimination of a scientifically inarguable summary statement that “climate change has global consequences for human health and the environment.”

Rather than accede to these and other White House demands, EPA officials opted to delete the entire section on climate change from their report, prompting a storm of protest. EPA administrator Christine Todd Whitman resigned soon thereafter. Having pulled

out of the Kyoto treaty on global warming as one of its first actions upon taking office, the Bush administration still refuses to adopt meaningful regulations that would require American manufacturers to reduce emissions of “greenhouse” gases.

In another incident, previously unpublicized, the UCS authors show the lengths to which the White House will go to suppress any discussion of global warming. Last September, US Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials put through a routine request to reprint a popular brochure explaining to farmers how they could help reduce greenhouse gas emissions resulting from carbon sequestration in the soil. When the White House Council on Environmental Quality objected to the brochure, the USDA dropped plans for the reprint. As one unnamed government official interviewed by the authors put it, “It is not just a case of micromanagement, but really of censorship of government information.”

The UCS report documents other examples of the suppression of scientific knowledge unfavorable to industry. A May 2002 EPA report showing the extent of mercury poisoning among women of child-bearing age was on hold for nine months pending a White House “review.” Finally, a frustrated EPA staffer leaked a draft to the *Wall Street Journal*. The report was then issued only days after the *Journal*’s publication of the leaked draft.

More recently, long-awaited EPA rules covering mercury emissions from power plants were discovered to have incorporated 12 paragraphs lifted from an industry legal document. The main source of mercury in the environment comes from coal-fired power plants, whose owners have close ties with both George W. Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney.

Some of the most egregious examples of interference with scientific judgment involve the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). From his time as governor of Texas, Bush has supported an “abstinence-only” approach to sex education, in spite of the near unanimous support of the medical community for a comprehensive approach, which, while encouraging abstinence, also provides information on birth control and on how to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Recent analyses have found that, rather than reducing unwanted teen pregnancies, “abstinence-only” programs may actually increase them.

According to interviews with CDC employees, top Bush administration officials forced the CDC to drop a project entitled “Programs that Work,” which identified sex education programs that scientific studies had shown to be effective. The five programs identified in 2002 were all based on a comprehensive approach, rather than abstinence-only. The White House ordered all references to the programs deleted from the CDC web site.

Similarly, high officials from the Health and Human Services Department (HHS), which oversees the CDC, demanded the elimination from the CDC web site of a fact sheet that included information on the proper use of condoms, as well as on studies showing that condom education does not promote sexual activity. The replacement document instead emphasized condom failure rates and the effectiveness of abstinence, as well as raising scientifically unsubstantiated doubts about the effectiveness of condom use in preventing the spread of AIDS.

In yet another case, over strong staff objections, the fanatical anti-abortion Bush administration required the National Cancer Institute web site to post discredited allegations of a link between abortion and breast cancer. A public outcry forced the removal of the false information.

In one of its most damaging sections, the UCS report discusses the Bush/Cheney allegations that Saddam Hussein's attempt to purchase aluminum tubes constituted proof of his effort to acquire nuclear weapons. These allegations were brought up repeatedly as part of Washington's buildup to war, including by Bush himself in his September 12, 2002, speech to the United Nations, as well as by Secretary of State Colin Powell as a key part of his presentation there on February 5, 2003.

However, experts from the Department of Energy's national laboratories at Oak Ridge, Livermore and Los Alamos had gone on record saying that the tubes in question were not suitable for enriching uranium, but were identical to tubes used in short-range missiles such as those acquired by Iraq in the 1980s. Although opposed by the CIA, this analysis was supported by State Department intelligence officials, as well as by independent experts at the International Atomic Energy Agency. As the report states, it was not a matter of "faulty intelligence"—as it has been presented in the media—but "that the administration knowingly disregarded scientific analysis of intelligence data that contradicted its case."

The UCS report goes into many other instances of the abuse of science. A Department of Agriculture scientist found high levels of antibiotic-resistant bacteria in the air surrounding hog confinement operations, but his superiors ordered him not to present his research at scientific conferences. In fact, the UCS authors uncovered a whole list of "sensitive issues" on which USDA scientists must seek prior approval before publishing or speaking publicly. The issues include "agricultural practices with negative health and environmental consequences, e.g., global climate change; contamination of water by hazardous materials (nutrients, pesticides, and pathogens); [and] animal feeding operations or crop production practices that negatively impact soil, water or air quality."

Other issues involve sabotaging the Endangered Species Act; overruling US Fish and Wildlife Service plans to let the Missouri River flow more naturally to the detriment of barge owners and agribusinesses; and the reversal of a model plan for forest management developed by some 100 scientists over nine years. The replacement plan allowed commercial harvesting of nearly three times as much timber.

An entire section of the report is devoted to the Bush administration's packing of scientific advisory councils and

government agencies with people whose political credentials count far more than their professional reputations. In the summer of 2002, just as the CDC's Advisory Committee on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention was due to consider lowering the allowable level of lead in human blood, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson took the unprecedented action of rejecting the CDC's nominees for the panel and replacing them with people who were sure to oppose any tightening of the lead poisoning standard. At least two of the new appointees had financial ties to the lead industry.

Other appointments include that of Dr. David Hager—co-author of a book that prescribes scripture readings for premenstrual syndrome, and who reportedly refuses to prescribe contraceptives to unmarried women—to the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) Reproductive Health Advisory Committee, which advises the agency on abortion, contraceptives and other potentially controversial medical issues. Similarly, Dr. Joseph McIlhaney was appointed to the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS. While his resume is lacking in published peer-reviewed research, the Texas-based doctor has expressed in writing his disdain for the view that condoms are effective in halting the spread of AIDS.

Two defense-related advisory panels were abolished altogether. One consisted of technical experts on nuclear weapons reporting to the National Nuclear Security Administration, and the other was a committee that advised the State Department on arms control issues. In the former case, several of the physicists on the panel had published articles explaining the limited capability of nuclear weapons to destroy deeply buried targets. Such views, not controversial in the scientific community, cut across the administration's plans to develop nuclear "bunker busters," for which funds were allocated in its fiscal 2004 budget.

In summarizing their findings, the UCS authors state, "[O]bjective scientific knowledge is being distorted for political ends by the Bush administration, and misrepresented or even withheld from Congress and the public at large." They quote a former CDC staff scientist who put it more bluntly: "We're seeing a clear substitution of ideology for science."

The Bush administration reacted to the report by denying the conclusions, without challenging the accounts of events that substantiate its conclusions. Bush's chief science advisor, Dr. John Marburger III, discounted the facts presented and described the report as a largely disconnected list of events. "In most cases," he said, "these are not profound actions that were taken as the result of a policy. They are individual actions that are part of the normal processes within the agencies."

The report, as well as the accompanying statement, press release and the list of signers, can be found on the UCS web site at www.ucsusa.org.



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