

Bush appointees censor scientists at government agencies

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Last month, James E. Hansen, a senior scientist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), accused appointees of the Bush administration in the agency's public affairs department of attempting to prevent him from publicly discussing the role of fossil fuel emissions in climate change.

At a conference on science and the environment at the New School in New York City last week, Hansen said that officials at another agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), had similarly prevented scientists from discussing their findings on global warming.

Hansen's accusations have prompted denials from the heads of both agencies, calls for congressional investigations, editorials in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and the departure of at least one official from NASA.

Hansen is a climatologist and the director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies. He has worked for the agency since 1967 and since 1998 has been warning the public about the long-term greenhouse effects caused by carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of coal and petroleum products.

In a series of interviews with the *New York Times*, he outlined the attempts by NASA to silence him after December 6 when he gave a lecture to the American Geophysical Union. In his talk, he suggested that without the leadership of the United States in making substantial cuts in the emission of fossil fuels, climate change would in time make the earth "a different planet."

On December 15, Hansen released data that showed that 2005 was the warmest year in at least a century. Officials in NASA's public affairs office, apparently speaking on behalf of their superiors, said Hansen would suffer "dire consequences" if he continued making such statements. Hansen has produced internal memorandums warning that if he persisted he would be replaced by supervisors in future news interviews.

According to Leslie McCarthy, a career public affairs

officer at the Goddard Institute, George Deutsch, a recent Bush appointee in the same unit, rejected a request by National Public Radio (NPR) for an interview with Hansen. Referring to notes she took during a conversation, she said that Deutsch called NPR "the most liberal" media outlet in the country and that his job was "to make the president look good."

Deutsch, according to the *New York Times*, instructed one NASA web designer to insert the word "theory" after every mention of the Big Bang on a NASA web site because this standard scientific explanation of the origin of the universe is an "opinion" and that NASA should also entertain the possibility of "intelligent design by a creator."

The situation at the NOAA, which includes the National Weather Service, is, if anything, even more alarming. According to the *Times*, "At climate laboratories [of NOAA]...many scientists who routinely took calls from reporters five years ago can now only do so if the interview is approved by administration officials in Washington, and then only if a public affairs officer is present on the phone."

Scientists at the NOAA are instructed not to draw parallels between climatological phenomena and global warming. NOAA's head hurricane forecaster, Gerry Bell, in a November 29 press conference, according to an article by John B. Judis in the online edition of the *New Republic*, flatly denied that an increase in the intensity of hurricanes in 2005 was a product of global warming. This contradicts evidence assembled by researchers that the intensity, though not necessarily the frequency, of hurricanes have an observable cause in global warming.

At other times, according to Judis's article, NOAA officials are more careful to tweak their statements on global warming. Max Mayfield, the director of NOAA's National Hurricane Center said before the Senate Commerce Committee that an increased activity in hurricanes is part of a regular pattern and not "increased *substantially* [Judis's italics] by global warming."

Judis notes that a recent issue of the NOAA's Internet journal says "NOAA attributes recent increase in hurricane

activity [as opposed to hurricane intensity; Judis's italics] to naturally occurring multi-decadal climate variability.”

Scientists with links to NOAA describe an atmosphere of intimidation at the agency. Judis cites Jerry Mahlman, who retired in 2000 as the director of NOAA's Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, as saying that scientists who do not toe the official line on global warming are having their papers withheld from publication. “I know a lot of people who would love to talk to you, but they don't dare. They're afraid of getting fired.”

Hansen in his talk at the New School remarked that censorship at the NOAA “seems more like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union than the United States.”

The creator of this policy at NOAA, according to Mahlman, is its director, Conrad C. Lautenbacher, a retired naval officer with a doctorate in applied mathematics. Lautenbacher declared in 2003 that “I do believe we need more scientific info before we commit to a process like Kyoto,” referring to the limited proposals of the Kyoto Protocol to decrease carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere.

In response to Hansen's accusations, Lautenbacher has said that his policy is to have a “free and open organization.” The head of NASA, Michael C. Griffin sent out an e-mail to the agency's 19,000 employees claiming that the NASA is committed to “open scientific and technical inquiry and dialogue with the public.

“Free” and “open” and even “inquiry” are not words that come to mind when reviewing the Bush administration's attitude toward science and technology. For example, the FBI is currently investigating at least 16 complaints from NASA's employees that the agency's inspector general, Robert Cobb, suppressed investigations into safety violations in NASA's manned space flights.

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Dennis Coldren, a retired manager of NASA space station and space shuttle audits, alleged that several weeks before the 2003 Columbia shuttle disaster, Cobb had stifled an inquiry into canceled funding for upgrading shuttle infrastructure. Before his appointment to NASA, Cobb worked as an ethics lawyer in the White House Office of the General Counsel.

Across a wide spectrum of federal agencies, Bush operatives have silenced scientists, stalled research, and denied the public accurate information about vital issues. In December, the federal Environmental Protection Agency issued instructions to local agencies to restrict research that showed that poor neighborhoods had higher levels of air pollution than affluent ones.

The Food and Drug Administration's director of the Office of Women's Health, Susan B. Wood, resigned over repeated delays in the approval of the morning-after

contraceptive pill known as Plan B, contrary to the recommendations of the FDA's scientists. In a recent interview in the *Seattle Times*, Wood said she was convinced the decision came from some higher level of the government and that the FDA's own experts' “advice” and “knowledge of what was going on was pushed aside. That should worry people.”

The *Washington Post* has reported that scientists at the Department of Health and Human Services and the Agriculture Department have complained that Bush-appointed public affairs officers screen interviews and public statements with a severity previously unknown. The complaints were issued off the record because employees fear losing their jobs.

The Bush administration's contempt for science itself and the full, democratic disclosure of research are characteristic of a regime hostile to social progress in every sense.

Corporate interests that support the Bush government, such as the coal and oil industries, are hostile to any research that could obstruct their drive for profits—in particular, evidence that emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere at the current rate will lead to an environmental and ecological disaster in the coming decades.

The administration has installed its cadre of operatives in federal agencies, often Christian fundamentalists, who are opposed to the analysis of objective reality, preferring blind faith, whether in God or the president, to unbiased and rational inquiry.

The fact that scientists are rebelling against administration censorship is itself significant. As Hansen remarked about global warming, “public opinion is probably the only thing capable of overcoming the special interests that have obfuscated the topic.”



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