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Bush's science flashpoints

The president-elect seems to have failed to inspire scientists during his campaign. Although support for research will probably grow, some policies and appointments are likely to signal trouble ahead.

Incorrigible optimism is the primary characteristic of American society that differentiates it from all other countries. After last week's Supreme Court ruling awarded the presidency of the United States to George W. Bush, in less than auspicious circumstances, most Americans, of whatever political hue, are strongly inclined to give their president-elect the benefit of the doubt.

Some US citizens harbour more doubt than others, however. The gun lobby can have little doubt about its preferred candidate's aversion to gun control. In contrast, the minorities who believe themselves to have been disenfranchized in certain precincts of Florida may never see Bush as a legitimate president.

The scientific community, as far as one can generalize, sits between these two extremes. Many scientists have concerns about Bush's self-avowed lack of intellectual curiosity, and most probably voted against him — polls show him losing badly among Americans holding higher degrees. But these initial doubts need not undermine the relationship that must be built between science and the new administration. There are, however, some areas in which the view of the scientific community, as expressed through the relevant scientific societies, clearly falls into conflict with the likely agenda of the new administration (see pages 887 and 888).

The first of these potential flashpoints concerns the status of human embryonic stem-cell research at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). As *Nature* went to press, it was being suggested that the secretaryship of the Department of Health and Human Services, of which the NIH is part, might be awarded to someone who can be relied on, in effect, to oppose abortion on every available front.

It is to be fervently hoped that the directorship of the NIH itself will not be awarded on a similar basis. Although Harold Varmus, who led the agency for most of the Clinton years, was regarded by the Democrats as politically reliable, it was his exceptional scientific credentials that enabled the NIH to win impressive, bipartisan political support. The expansion of the NIH to a $20 billion agency and beyond has become one of the most important and impressive projects of the US government. It requires a leader who enjoys not only the confidence of the incoming Republican administration, but also, by virtue of scientific stature and vision, that of the biomedical research community. A handful of such candidates exist.

A second potential flashpoint concerns the status of environmental science within the new administration. The application of this science to environmental regulation has always been highly charged politically, and the Clinton administration certainly didn't make it any less so. The challenge for the new administration here is to rise above the temptation merely to avenge its political enemies on environmental issues and instead to prove to a sometimes sceptical public that Republicans value environmental protection. After all, that is what Richard Nixon was trying to do when he set up the Environmental Protection Agency.

It is also what Senator John McCain (Republican, Arizona) has been doing during his recent reconsideration of the global-warming issue, which was undertaken after the conservative senator ran his own race for the Republican nomination last winter and discovered on the campaign trail — amazingly enough — that young people are fearful for the future of the planet. Bush needs to take a leaf out of McCain's book and look again at the evidence for man-made global warming, and at America's possible role in averting it.

A third potential flashpoint concerns the Bush administration's pledge to deploy National Missile Defense. Many US physicists have hotly contested the technical claims made by the proponents of missile-defence systems. In the past, this particular issue has proven to be a disaster for relations between Republican administrations and scientists. But the stakes are not as high as they were during the Cold War. The forthcoming arguments about such matters as the effectiveness of decoys and the feasibility of modifications to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty should be resolved without utterly souring relations between the White House and America's physicists.

In each of these areas, the role of a new science adviser to the president will be crucial. Bush may become the first president to place a biologist in this position, reflecting the gradual displacement of national security by health as the US government's highest scientific priority. The science and technology enterprise is one of the few areas of the government's business that enjoys genuine bipartisan support, and the new administration should build on the funding progress made by the outgoing administration and Congress, acting in unlikely concert.

The appointments Bush makes in the next few months will set the tone for his administration. Despite the alleged requirement for the new president to place Democrats in a few high-profile positions, it is the people further down, those who do the government's work, who will set the real tone. It will soon be apparent, from the scientific appointments alone, whether George W. seeks to unite his nation, or to divide it yet more deeply. ■

Futures' end

Given its stature and its heavy rotation on cable TV, it is a constant source of amazement that only 12 episodes of John Cleese's comedy *Fawlty Towers* were ever made. Wisely, the producers decided to quit while they were ahead, and every episode stands as a gem. Thus are legends made: live fast and die young.

In the same way, we and at least some readers have had fun with Futures, our science-fictional *jeu d'esprit*, which comes to a thumping conclusion this week (see page 913). The series has covered the extinction and transfiguration of humanity; manifestations of divinity; conversations with androids, extraterrestrials and even bacteria; and the total destruction of the Earth (twice). As the inevitable end of the series approached, we began to ask ourselves what we'll be doing for excitement next. Like the Star Child at the conclusion of Arthur C. Clarke's millennial novel, *2001*, we're sure we'll think of something. ■