

## Problems with the president

**Rapid-fire decisions on ergonomics, arsenic levels and carbon dioxide emissions indicate that scientific opinion sits low in the pecking order of influence inside the new Bush administration.**

It normally takes several months for a new US administration to find its tone, as thousands of mid-level political appointees arrive in Washington to man the levers of government, and relationships are established with other power centres, including the Congress. But a string of regulatory decisions made by George W. Bush and others in recent weeks make it abundantly clear where his administration stands on matters in which scientists would normally play an important advisory role. It stands firmly with the employers and polluters who helped to pay for Bush's singularly unimpressive election victory last November, and damn the scientific evidence.

The first decision, on ergonomics, was instigated by the Republican-controlled Congress, which passed a law, immediately signed by Bush, to debar ergonomic regulations, proposed by the previous administration, on the grounds of their alleged cost (see *Nature* **410**, 292; 2001). Although the action was widely interpreted as a successful attack by business interests on the labour unions, it also inflicts damage on the political prestige of the National Academy of Sciences, whose recent report on the matter was blithely disregarded.

The credibility of Christie Whitman, already seen as marginalized in her role as Bush's administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), took a further dip last week when she issued a stalling order on a proposal left over from the Clinton administration that would have sharply reduced the level of arsenic in drinking water (see page 503). A National Academy study on this topic found that the cancer risk at the current level — which dates from 1942 — is extraordinarily high. Whitman is promising a new rule soon, but meanwhile the administration is in the invidious position of arguing that the United States cannot afford the arsenic standard that is already required in Europe and is recommended by the World Health Organization.

The most economically and politically significant of the three decisions came on 13 March, when the administration wrote to four senators informing them that it would renege on its pre-election promise to regulate emissions of carbon dioxide (see *Nature* **410**, 401; 2001). The wording of this letter has produced bemusement among even moderate Republicans, who note that it fails to offer any consistent explanation for its summary rejection of the accumulated scientific evidence that greenhouse-gas emissions are contributing to climate change.

The reversal on carbon dioxide has been accompanied by some shameless dissembling by Bush's supporters over the circumstances in which he originally promised to regulate carbon dioxide emissions on the campaign trail. It is being falsely claimed that the promise was barely noticed at the time it was made, and that its insertion in a campaign speech was a "mistake" made by low-level Bush operatives.

On the contrary, the promise was made as part of a concerted effort to portray Bush as a new kind of conservative, sensitive to ordinary suburban voters' concerns about the environment and, it was even suggested, more likely to make real progress on environmental issues than Al Gore, the green evangelist. But instead of bringing a new pragmatism to the climate-change issue, and perhaps providing American leadership on the control of domestic emissions that could have opened the way to renegotiating the unrealistic targets set under the Kyoto Protocol, Bush has seen fit to capitulate to the coal industry at the first available opportunity.

One price — perhaps intentionally exacted — is the humiliation of Whitman, who spent her first month at the EPA telling everyone who would listen that Bush intended to get serious about climate change (see *Nature* **410**, 133; 2001). But a bigger price will be paid by many others if Bush persists in ignoring what science is telling him. ■

## Fossil-fuelled feuds

**Palaeontology and local politics make troublesome bedfellows.**

An unseemly row between rival palaeontologists in Kenya (see page 508) provides a glimpse of the explosive mix of internecine rivalry between palaeoanthropological research groups fighting for mining rights to rare fossil sites, and the politics of the African countries that are home to some of the world's most precious digs. Clashes have also occurred in Uganda, Ethiopia and elsewhere.

Underlying such disputes is a resurgence in many African countries of a desire to take control of their fossils after decades of safari research by foreign groups who, for reasons both within and beyond their control, have largely failed to build local scientific competence. The foreign groups of palaeoanthropologists established in Africa have little incentive to change the status quo. But what is important is not so much who makes the rules — important for establishing priority to those who have invested long and hard in a particular site, and providing for protocols that best preserve stored fossils and regulate their export — but how they are enforced.

Palaeoanthropologists should spend less time fighting with one another, and pay more attention to their common enemy: the degra-

dation of rare fossil sites — mankind's common heritage. The international palaeontology community must develop methods for impartial arbitration to resolve disputes, do more to encourage ethical conduct, and work with agencies such as UNESCO to protect such sites.

As with any science, palaeontology's future reputation depends on principles of good conduct. Young researchers should accordingly consider commandments recommended by Tim White from the University of California at Berkeley in "A view on the science: physical anthropology at the millennium" (see *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* **113**, 287–292; 2000): "In the field do not think you are going to step out of the vehicle and pick up a hominid within 20 meters on the first day. Do not claim that you found the fossil if the other person did. The truth will eventually come out. Do not purchase fossils. Do not reject papers or grant applications for personal or political reasons. Do not bribe officials. Do not steal another person's site, particularly when that person is a local scholar in a developing country." And, it might be added: to avoid charges of bad behaviour, keep accessible and verifiable records of your activities. ■