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# Bush administration dismisses allegations of scientific bias

**Geoff Brumfiel, Washington**

The White House has issued a detailed rebuttal to claims that it is distorting scientific evidence to further its political agenda.

The statement was issued on 2 April by John Marburger, President Bush's science adviser. It offers a point-by-point response to a February report by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) that accused the White House of "misrepresenting and suppressing scientific knowledge" (see *Nature* 427, 663; 2004).

The UCS report, which was accompanied by a statement from some 60 leading researchers, generated considerable national media coverage, and Republicans and Democrats grilled Marburger about the charges it contains in congressional hearings last month.

Now the president's beleaguered science adviser has hit back. "I hope this response will correct errors, distortions and misunderstandings in the Union of Concerned Scientists' document," he writes in the introduction to the 20-page rebuttal.

The White House argues, for example, that a section on climate change in a June 2003 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) report was not suppressed, as alleged, but was omitted in favour of a reference to the more extensive Climate Change Science Program released the following month. "The Administration chose, appropriately, to present information in a single ... far more complete format," the statement says. And the Department of Agriculture sought to prevent the publication of an analysis on the dangers of airborne bacteria in February 2002 because its



**Fresh perspective:** John Marburger has issued a point-by-point rebuttal of critics' accusations.

author, James Zahn, a microbiologist then at the Agriculture Research Service in Ames, Iowa, "did not have any scientific data or expertise in the scientific area in question".

Marburger has received some backing from the administration's supporters in Washington. "I don't think this administration has been politicizing science," says Robert Walker, a lobbyist and former Republican chair of the House Science Committee. "My concern is with the UCS report: it's a political diatribe."

But Sidney Drell, former deputy director of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center in California, says he is "disappointed" by the White House document. "Marburger denies there's a problem," he says, "but there is one."

Kurt Gottfried, a particle physicist at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and chairman of the UCS, says that "on the most important issues, Marburger's response doesn't really stand up". The section on the EPA climate report, for example, fails to acknowledge an internal EPA memo that said it was changed for political reasons, he says.

Zahn, who is now at Iowa State University, says that the statement is "missing the point" when it says that he lacked expertise in airborne bacteria. "I never purported to be an authority on microbial transfer," he says. "But it was an important finding and it needed to be reported." Zahn also says that his findings have now been confirmed by a group in the Netherlands. ■

## Law paves way for concealed guns on campus

**Rex Dalton, San Diego**

The state of Utah has passed legislation that will compel its universities to allow concealed handguns on campus.

The law, signed on 25 March by state governor Olene Walker and due to take effect on 3 May, instructs institutions including the University of Utah in Salt Lake City to

allow the guns. For more than two years, the university has battled to maintain its exemption from a 1996 law that allows permit holders to carry concealed weapons in the state (see *Nature* 417, 212; 2003).

The passage of the new law has caused consternation among faculty members at the university, which is currently seeking

a president to replace Bernard Machen, who left in January to become president of the University of Florida at Gainesville.

Andrew Gitlin, a sociologist who is president of the university's academic senate, says that the legislation will deter many candidates. "The first question they will be asked is: will you fight this or not?" he says. ■