Not the best advice

Concerns about the next president's science adviser miss the real issues, says **David Goldston**.

Two prestigious groups recently issued recommendations on how to strengthen the science advisory arm of the White House — the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). Most of the suggestions are pretty basic; it's hard to imagine anyone disagreeing with them, at least in the abstract. But they raise a more fundamental question: should the science community be so obsessed with the OSTP?

The recommendations come from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars[1] and the Center for the Study of the Presidency[2]. They fundamentally offer the same advice — appoint a prestigious scientist to head the OSTP early in the next administration, fund the office well, and ensure that the president hears from many scientists. These are all old chestnuts even if they haven't always been followed.

But a more pointed recommendation in the two reports highlights how the focus on the OSTP may say more about the mindset of scientists than about the nature of government. Both groups begin by arguing that the OSTP director should also hold the title of Assistant to the President for Science and Technology. This was always the case until George W. Bush took office. In fact, the presidential assistant position existed decades before the statutory creation of the OSTP in 1976. The loss of the title has stuck in the craw of science-policy panjandrums for eight years because it seemed to signify that scientists had been cast out of the president's inner circle.

It would indeed be a welcome gesture for the next president to restore the title, but would it make any practical difference? Can anyone cite any decision that has been different because the current head of the OSTP, John Marburger, was not called 'Assistant to the President'? The prominence given to the recommendation about a title speaks volumes about the scientific community's hypersensitivity to perceived slights and its excessive insecurity about its stature, but it says almost nothing about governance.

Although the Bush administration has never explained why it withdrew the title, it seems to be part of this White House's general effort to reveal as little as possible about the inner workings of government. The position of director of the OSTP was created by Congress, and the appointment must be confirmed by the Senate.

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It is more difficult legally for a president to make claims of confidentiality for advice given by an official with a congressional pedigree. Generally, presidential assistants are not beholden to Congress in this way; they are simply the president's personal advisers. The last thing the Bush administration would have wanted was to give the title of presidential assistant to an official over whom Congress could exercise some authority.

This isn't just a theoretical concern. In 2005, the Bush administration went so far as to try to prevent Floyd Kvamme, a venture capitalist who chairs the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), from testifying before Congress, arguing that he was a presidential adviser whose views should be confidential. The White House eventually backed off, partly based on the argument that the advisory group was congressionally chartered. As a congressional staffer, I helped lead the battle against the White House in this dispute, which never became public.

The science community is blind to all this because of its insular focus. It tends to assume that decisions related to science policy primarily reflect attitudes towards scientists and science when in fact they are often driven by broader concerns. As a result, the two reports implicitly asked the wrong question about a president's politics. The best indicator about the future OSTP director's title may be a candidate's views on government secrecy, not science.

The focus on the OSTP itself may be similarly misdirected. Certainly the OSTP can be important in shaping policy, and its more mundane role of coordinating inter-agency research efforts is essential. But is it the best place to start an inquiry into the future of science policy? The reports seem to assume that having a well-known science adviser with good access to the president will mean scientists will be happy for the next four years. But that just isn't the case.

Both documents look back fondly on Allan Bromley, the late Yale University physicist who ran the OSTP during the administration of the elder George Bush. Bromley had a long-standing personal relationship with the president, and even got Bush to invite PCAST to Camp David, the presidential retreat. But that didn't make that first Bush administration some kind of golden age of science.

A major science issue at the time was the extent to which the federal government should invest in research to strengthen US competitiveness, then taking a beating from Japan. The administration of the elder Bush remained internally divided on the issue, with the opposition to such investments led by the director of the Office of Management and Budget — a far more powerful post than OSTP director even though it doesn't carry the title of presidential adviser. As a result, the federal government had made only tepid movement towards a competitiveness policy by the time Bush left office in 1993.

Neither Bromley's stature as a scientist nor his closeness to the president enabled him to control the administration's position on research spending, which was not determined by the president's attitude towards science. The issue came down to a philosophical debate about the role of the government in the economy. The science budget was affected, as always, by factors far broader than science and therefore by officials with broader portfolios.

Other interest groups tend not to fall into this trap of worrying about prestige and narrowly defined issues. Environmentalists, for example, don't spend much time writing recommendations about the White House Council on Environmental Quality, an office with a parallel role to that of the OSTP. And they don't just focus on specific policy goals; they worry if a candidate's overall governing philosophy indicates that little will come of his professed warm feelings towards the environment.

The science community's focus on status, access and love of science can cause it to overlook the broader issues that are more likely to determine how a president treats scientists. ■

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1. http://wilsoncenter.org/news/docs/OSTP%20Paper1.pdf (2008).
2. http://election2008.aaas.org/docs/CSP_PresidentialLeadership.pdf (2008).

For more on the US election, see www.nature.com/uselection