

# nature structural & molecular biology

## The politics of science

As the US 2004 presidential election approaches it is worth stepping back to review the administration's science and technology policies. Unfortunately, our review of the record leads us to conclude that the Bush administration has repeatedly let politics rather than scientific findings determine policy. While the impact of some of these decisions is immediate, such as the 2001 decision to restrict federal funding for embryonic stem cell research, the ramifications of other policies are only gradually being realized.

The administration's science policies have not gone unnoticed. The minority staff of the Government Reform Committee issued a report in August 2003 citing 21 examples in which the administration interfered with the scientific process<sup>1</sup>. Representative Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), the ranking member of the committee, said, "distinguished scientists, scientific organizations, and leading science journals have objected to this administration's violations of scientific integrity." In February 2004, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), a group best known for its support of environmental preservation and nuclear disarmament, published a report in which the scientists charged the Bush administration with widespread and unprecedented "manipulation of the process through which science enters into its decisions"<sup>2</sup>.

In response to the UCS report, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy issued a point-by-point rebuttal by Director John H. Marburger III dismissing the UCS' complaints as "wrong and misleading," and full of "errors, distortions and misunderstandings"<sup>3</sup>. After reviewing the administration's rebuttal the UCS issued a statement saying that it stood by the findings and conclusions of their report<sup>2</sup>.

Among the cases cited, the reports charge the administration with:

- Changing, eliminating or suppressing scientific information.
- Altering government web sites, removing information that conflicts with administration priorities or adding unsubstantiated information that supports such priorities.
- Placing controversial people in science policy positions and eliminating people from scientific advisory committees who hold views that are at odds with the administration's stated policies.

Of course this is not the first time that individual scientists and scientific organizations have disagreed with specific federal policies. But the level of interference by this administration with regard to scientific committees, public information and scientific research seems unprecedented and officials from past administrations, including members of the Nixon, Ford, George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations, have publicly spoken out. For example, Russell Train, who served as Environmental Protection Agency administrator to Presidents Nixon and Ford, wrote in a letter to the *New York Times*, "I can state categorically that there never was such White House intrusion into the business of the E.P.A. during my tenure. The E.P.A. was established as an independent agency in the executive branch, and so it should remain. There appears today to be a steady erosion in its independent status. I can appreciate the president's interest in not having discordant voices within his Administration. But

the interest of the American people lies in having full disclosure of the facts, particularly when the issue is one with such potentially enormous damage to the long-term health and economic well-being of all of us"<sup>4</sup>.

Likewise, a broad spectrum of the scientific community, typically reticent to involve themselves in political issues, has expressed opposition to the administration's overall science policy. Since the release of the original UCS report more than 4,000 scientists, including 48 Nobel laureates, have signed onto the statement. They include scientists with ties to both Republican and Democratic administrations.

But disagreements with the administration's science policies have not subsided. In July 2004 the UCS released an updated report stating that "the administration has continued to undermine the integrity of science in policymaking seemingly unchecked"<sup>2</sup>. They cite several new incidents that have surfaced since the original report.

Among the better-known examples of the administration applying political litmus tests to the appointment of members to its scientific advisory councils is the removal of Drs. Blackburn and May, and the subsequent appointment of new members who are supportive of the administration's stated positions, from the President's Council on Bioethics. According to Dr. Blackburn, she and Dr. May frequently disagreed with the administration's positions on the ethics of biomedical research.

In August 2004 a senior official of the Food and Drug Administration blocked over-the-counter access to the morning-after emergency contraceptive known as Plan B, despite the fact that the agency's own advisory committee and staff scientists voted in favor of making it available without a prescription. In most cases the agency follows the recommendations of its advisory panels, so this decision has surprised and angered many. An editorial published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* argued that the "FDA's decision-making process is being influenced by political considerations"<sup>5</sup>. This policy will lead to an increase in the number of unplanned pregnancies in the US, which is already unparalleled among industrialized nations.

Given the controversial science policy decisions made by this administration, we should all be 'concerned' scientists. It is essential that science advisory committees be "fairly balanced in terms of the points of view represented" and provide advice that "will not be inappropriately influenced by the appointing authority or by any special interest"<sup>6</sup>. Likewise, scientific research must be independently conducted and objectively presented to the public. The public depends on federal agencies to develop science-based policies that protect the nation's health and welfare. Once that trust is lost it will be difficult to regain. ■

1. [http://democrats.reform.house.gov/features/politics\\_and\\_science/report.htm](http://democrats.reform.house.gov/features/politics_and_science/report.htm)
2. <http://www.ucusa.org/rsi>
3. <http://www.ostp.gov/html/ucs/ReponsetoCongressonUCSDocumentApril2004.pdf>
4. Russell E. Train 'When Politics Trumps Science' (Letter to the Editor) *New York Times* (21 June 2003).
5. Drazen, J.M., Greene, M.F. & Wood, A.J.J. *N. Engl. J. Med.* **350**, 1561–1562 (2004).
6. [http://www.epic.org/open\\_gov/faca.html](http://www.epic.org/open_gov/faca.html)