

Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
“Framing Science: Has Politics Taken Over the Direction of Scientific Research”
Plenary Session of the
National Association of Science Writers

February 16, 2005

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this morning’s session. I am pleased to be here with Dr. Rita Colwell and Dr. John Marburger, two distinguished scientists who have dedicated much of their careers to public service.

I am also grateful for the chance to speak with science writers — especially to so many of you and all at once. I am not flattering you when I say that you play a critical role in our democracy. You are a bridge between the scientific world and policymakers and the public. Every day, you translate complex but immensely important scientific issues into terms the rest of us can understand.

I know firsthand the importance of science to public policy. I have been in Congress for over 30 years. And during this period, my proudest legislative accomplishments — the Hatch-Waxman Generic Drug Act ... the Orphan Drug Act ... the Clean Air Act of 1990 ... the Nutrition Labeling Act ... the Ryan White Act and other AIDS laws ... and NIH, Public Health Service, and Medicaid legislation — have all resulted from collaboration with the scientific community.

In my experience, the key to the creation of effective policy is access to the best available scientific research. Policymakers need to know the facts, no matter what their implications. Knowing the facts is essential to designing programs that work.

And that is why I am so concerned about the state of science under the Bush Administration.

Over the last four years, experts appointed to advisory panels have been subjected to political litmus tests. Scientists have been barred from conducting research that conflicts with Administration policies. And scientific conclusions have been rejected when politically inconvenient.

We are witnessing an assault on the basic principle that science should inform policy, not echo a political agenda.

* * *

I serve as the ranking Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee. This Committee is the principal oversight committee in the House. After a series of federal scientists contacted my office with concerns about excessive political interference, I began to investigate how science is conducted under the Bush Administration.

What we have found has serious implications for science and policy. There are some areas where science has flourished. The Administration places a high priority on fighting terrorism. And it has generously supported and funded scientists working in this field.

But when scientific research and the scientific method conflict with White House priorities, politics triumphs and science is distorted and suppressed.

And that is profoundly wrong.

One area where we have seen the repeated intrusion of politics into science is in the selection of scientific advisory committees. There are dozens of scientific advisory committees throughout government. And they play an essential — but often underappreciated — role in government.

Yet in repeated instances, the most qualified scientists have been rejected from advisory committees because of their political views, while others with scant qualifications have been appointed.

A good example is the CDC advisory committee on childhood lead poisoning. Dr. Michael Weitzman from the University of Rochester and Dr. Bruce Lanphear from Cincinnati Children's Hospital are two of the most highly regarded experts on lead poisoning in the nation. Despite the recommendations of career scientists at CDC, they were rejected for the advisory committee by the Bush Administration.

In their place, the Administration appointed an industry consultant who believes that children can be exposed to massive amounts of lead — seven times the current standard — without suffering any cognitive problems.

When asked by journalists, an Administration spokesman denied that the lead industry had anything to do with these decisions. But later, the consultant himself admitted to a reporter that an industry representative had contacted him about the position.

Here are some more examples: A world renowned molecular biologist, Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn, was asked to leave the President's Council on Bioethics after she expressed concern about the dissemination of misleading information on stem cells.

Yet on the FDA's Reproductive Drugs Health Advisory Committee, the Administration appointed an individual whose principal publications are medical books with imbued religious themes — and who recommends that women with premenstrual syndrome pray for relief.

Many scientists now believe that there is a “political litmus” test for appointments to federal advisory committees. One who has spoken out about his experience is

University of New Mexico Professor William Miller. Dr. Miller is an expert on addiction who was recommended by NIH officials for appointment to an important panel on substance abuse. He told us that his vetting process went smoothly until he was asked for whom he had voted and whether he supported abortion rights.

When asked by journalists about Dr. Miller's experience, an Administration spokesman said there were no political litmus tests. But a physician who had nominated Dr. Miller later stated that she, too, had been called by political officials and asked about Dr. Miller's political views.

Defenders of the Administration argue that the President has the right to have people who support his views running the executive branch. And I agree. I may not agree with the Secretary of Health and Human Services or the Administrator of EPA, but I respect the right of the President to consider their political views and affiliations in filling his cabinet.

But advisory committees are a completely different matter. They don't make policy. If you manipulate their composition, you are rigging the process before the issues even get to the decision makers.

Another problem identified by our investigation is the widespread suppression of scientific research and analysis in federal agencies. A new example surfaced just last week. The Inspector General of the Environmental Protection Agency revealed that political appointees dictated the result that agency scientists had to produce in determining how much power plants could feasibly reduce mercury emissions.

Under the Clean Air Act, EPA is supposed to set standards for toxic emissions like mercury based on the maximum reduction that pollution control technology can achieve. The cornerstone for establishing these standards is technical analyses by agency scientists of what level of emission control is feasible.

These analyses should be done based upon the best available science. But in the mercury case, the President had proposed legislation — backed by the power industry — that would allow up to 34 tons of mercury pollution annually. So the agency scientists were told to redo their analyses until they came up with 34 tons as the maximum feasible reduction.

And this is not an isolated example. In many areas — from condoms to global warming to the protection of endangered species — science has been suppressed or distorted when it conflicts with the Administration's political agenda.

A particularly egregious example of political interference with science is FDA's rejection of an application for over-the-counter sale of "Plan B," a morning-after pill.

In this case, the advisory committee had recommended approval. So did the agency scientists handling the drug's application. Also in agreement was the head of

FDA's Office of New Drugs. But political leaders interceded and blocked the approval anyway.

The politicization of science does not stop at our borders. On a range of issues, the Bush Administration is trying to force other countries to reconsider well-established scientific conclusions. Administration officials have argued internationally that soft drinks do not cause weight gain and that condoms do not prevent HIV infection. And over the objections of leading scientific organizations, the Administration is now seeking to hand pick scientific advisors sent to the World Health Organization.

* * *

Today you will undoubtedly hear a vigorous defense of the Administration's approach to science from Dr. Marburger. And you may be tempted to dismiss my views as those of a Democratic congressman with a partisan ax to grind. But many others whose objectivity and independence cannot be questioned — and whose scientific expertise far exceeds mine — have expressed similar concerns.

The journal *Science* has editorialized that the Bush Administration “invades areas once immune to this kind of manipulation.” The journal *Nature* has characterized the Administration's approach to science as “ideologically driven” and “remarkably ill-judged.” The *New England Journal of Medicine* has criticized political interference in scientific decisionmaking where there is “no medical dispute.”

Mainstream scientific organizations including the Federation of American Societies of Experimental Biology, the American Association of Medical Colleges, and the American Academy for the Advancement of Science have all protested the treatment of science and scientists. So too have former scientific leaders from the Nixon and Ford Administrations and the first Bush Administration.

A telling comment is from Russell Train, who served as EPA Administrator under Presidents Nixon and Ford, who said: “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.”

Recently, 48 Nobel Laureates and hundreds of other senior scientists brought together by the Union of Concerned Scientists have expressed their growing concern about the Administration's actions. And they have called for a halt to “the distortion of scientific knowledge for partisan political ends.”

* * *

So where do we go from here?

Unfortunately, political interference with science has not been a self-correcting problem. When asked why its new policy on picking advisers to the World Health

Organization had generated controversy, an Administration spokesperson blamed “whining scientists.” When the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a report carefully documenting numerous problems with scientific integrity, an Administration appointee declared at a public forum that “it's pretty easy to walk through every allegation in the letter and shred it in about 10 seconds.”

On April 2, 2004, Dr. Marburger released a rebuttal to a Union of Concerned Scientists' report on the politicization of science. On many issues, this rebuttal consisted of asserted denials with little supporting evidence. On April 13, I wrote to Dr. Marburger asking for additional information to support his responses in 19 areas. Two months later, he wrote back a cursory 3-paragraph letter and provided no additional support for his claims.

Recently, I released a report showing that popular “abstinence only” curricula frequently contain serious scientific errors and omissions, such as the assertion that HIV can be transmitted through contact with sweat and tears. The response of a senior HHS official response was to deny that anything at all was wrong.

The conclusion I have reached is that it's time for Congress to intercede to protect the scientific integrity of the federal agencies. That is why later today I will introduce with Congressman Bart Gordon, the ranking minority member of the Science Committee, a bill entitled the Restore Scientific Integrity to Federal Research and Policymaking Act.

This cornerstone of the bill is a prohibition on (1) tampering with the conduct of federal research, (2) censoring federal scientists, and (3) disseminating false scientific information. The bill would also provide new protection for employees in the federal government who blow the whistle on political interference in science. And it would bar political litmus tests and enhance transparency for scientific advisory committees.

It would also require the White House Science Adviser to write a report to Congress each year describing the Administration's efforts to safeguard and protect scientific integrity.

These should not be controversial steps, but they are needed to ensure that science is a guide to policy, not a servant to politics. Our science-based agencies — the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control, the Environmental Protection Agency — have global reputations for excellence. We need to act now to protect their scientific integrity.

Our nation and our world face a host of very real threats to human health and our environment. As science writers, you know the details of these threats even better than I do. To confront these challenges, our national policies must be based on the best possible science.

Thank you.