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The Political Science Test

Bush said science would guide his decisions, but those in the lab see ideology intruding on their work

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CHECKING IN: President and Mrs. Bush visit a high school biology class in Dallas

The 3 1/2-hr. conference call brought together nearly two dozen of the nation's best minds on the subject of air quality--and many of them were steamed. As the scientists of the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, they are rarely overruled on their recommendations about how the government should react to the latest and best research on the dangers of dirty air. Seven months ago, they warned the EPA in a letter that unless it made at least modest reductions in the amount of airborne soot, thousands of Americans would die prematurely each year. But last December, EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson, citing "the best available science," ignored their counsel. On the phone call last week, an exasperated Dr. James Crapo, professor of medicine at Denver's National Jewish Medical and Research Center, told his fellow scientists, "We need to write another letter and this time take a stronger stand."

Starting when he was a presidential candidate in 2000, George W. Bush has often assured voters that his policymaking would be guided by "sound science." Last week, in his State of the Union address, the President pointed to scientific research as the way to "lead the world in opportunity and innovation for decades to come." Yet growing numbers of researchers, both in and out of government, say their findings--on pollution, climate change, reproductive health, stem-cell research and other areas in which science often finds itself at odds with religious, ideological or corporate interests--are being discounted, distorted or quashed by Bush Administration appointees.

White House officials don't see that pattern of interference. "This Administration has been very supportive of science," Bush's science adviser and respected physicist John Marburger told TIME. "The President wants us to do it right, and doesn't want us to do things that contradict the laws of nature." But in the past two years, the Union of Concerned Scientists has collected the signatures of more than 8,000 scientists--including 49 Nobel laureates, 63 National Medal of Science recipients and 171 members of the National Academies--who accuse the Administration of an unprecedented level of political intrusion into their world. "There have always been isolated incidents where people have played politics with science," says Francesca Grifo, director of the group's Scientific Integrity Program. "What's new is its pervasive and systemic nature. We get calls every week from federal scientists reporting stuff to us."

Rarely, however, are they willing to put their jobs and their research grants at risk by going public with their complaints. That's why it was so remarkable when one of the government's leading experts on climate change, 29-year NASA veteran James Hansen, who is director of the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, charged on the front page of the New York Times that he has been muzzled by the agency. He accused the agency of demanding to review his lectures, papers and postings to the NASA website, as well as screen his media interviews.

So respected is Hansen that he has been invited to brief Vice President Dick Cheney. The White House wanted to hear Hansen's findings that supported its view that there are easier and cheaper steps toward controlling global warming--reducing vehicle soot and methane emissions, for instance--than curbing carbon dioxide, which by some estimates would cost the energy industry \$100 billion or more. But Hansen's more recent research suggesting that global warming is accelerating, and that time is running out to find a solution, was less favorably received, he told TIME. "It just became so clear to me that they were interested in those things that they were doing anyhow, but they were not willing to consider the changes that would be needed to reduce the most important greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, in the near term."

NASA officials have denied that Hansen was silenced, and insist public-affairs officers routinely review interview requests. Hansen himself has not stayed outside the realm of politics, having announced in a 2004 speech at the University of Iowa that he planned to vote for John Kerry. Still, his scientific reputation is solid enough that Sherwood Boehlert, Republican chairman of the House Science Committee, wrote NASA Administrator Michael Griffin last week to demand an explanation and make clear that "good science cannot long persist in an atmosphere of intimidation ... NASA is clearly doing something wrong, given the sense of intimidation by Dr. Hansen and others who work with him." By the end of the week, Griffin had e-mailed the agency's 19,000 employees, saying public-affairs officers should not "alter, filter or adjust" the work of NASA scientists.

Boehlert does not see a larger problem of Administration meddling and suggests that Hansen probably fell victim to an overzealous, middle-level bureaucrat. "I don't for a moment think that the Administration is dictating from the White House some policy directed to silence distinguished scientists like Dr. Hansen," he says. And he noted that politics and science have never had an easy, hands-off relationship in Washington. "This is a town where people like to say they're for science-based decision making, until the scientific consensus leads to a politically inconvenient conclusion. Then they want to go to Plan B," he says. "That's seamless from one Administration to another; I don't care if it's a Republican or a Democrat."

Some who have experienced it from the inside, however, disagree. Dr. Gerald Keusch, former director of the Fogarty International Center at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), says he saw a marked change in its operations as the government moved from the Clinton to the Bush administrations. Under Clinton, Keusch says, he never encountered resistance in appointing experts to the advisory board that conducted peer reviews of grant proposals to the center, which focuses on international health issues, particularly in developing countries. He made seven nominations, and all were approved by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) within three weeks. Under Bush, his first four nominations were quickly endorsed by NIH but then, says Keusch, "it's 10 months before I hear from HHS, rejecting three of the four, including a Nobel laureate, with no reasons given." In return, HHS sent him the resumes of other people, many of whom had no expertise in infectious diseases or developing countries. Over the next three years, Keusch recalls, he had to nominate 26 people to fill seven vacancies and "came close to having a very dysfunctional advisory committee. I couldn't get a quorum anymore."

Keusch, now associate dean for global health at Boston University's School of Public Health, says ultimately he couldn't take the "disdainful and disparaging" way in which he was treated--and adds that he is not the only one. "People who have done extremely well in their positions have left because they're being disregarded," he says. But others, like Hansen, say that hostility is all the more reason to stay and speak out about what they are convinced are growing dangers to the world's health and environment. "I don't want my grandchildren in the future to say, 'He understood what was going to happen, but he didn't explain it to the people,'" Hansen says. "So I'm going to try to explain that story."