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Balancing politics isn't a science

The Bush administration is under attack from scientists and advocacy groups for misusing science to advance its political agenda.

"In this administration, science strongly informs policy," insists the president's science adviser, John Marburger, but a letter signed by more than 60 renowned scientists claims that "the administration has often manipulated the process through which science enters its decisions," while a report from the advocacy group the Union of Concerned Scientists asserts that "the current Bush administration has suppressed or distorted the scientific analyses of federal agencies."

Recent transgressions include the May 6 decision by the Food and Drug Administration to forbid over-the-counter sales of a new morning-after pill, ignoring the advice of a panel of technical experts, and a February decision by President Bush to replace two members of his Council on Bioethics, including a prominent biochemist, with people more ideologically compatible with his personal views.

Well ... yes. We all know that the current White House thinks that protecting embryos is more important than protecting the environment and that the profitability of chemical companies should take precedence over the potability of drinking water. No surprise here. But even if the manipulation of science at the hands of the Bush government is more egregious than in previous administrations, the real problem is the illusion that these controversies can and should be resolved scientifically, and by scientists.

The Council on Bioethics, for example, exists to advise the president on "ethical issues related to advances in biomedical science and technology," especially related to cloning, the use of embryos in research and the engineering of the human genome. The council must balance religious, moral and other beliefs about destruction of embryos and manipulation of human evolution against considerations of scientific freedom and the possible benefits of the research. But the important points here are that this balancing process is an ethical one, not a technical one, and that scientists have no special status or expertise when it comes to ethical decisions.

A similar confusion surrounds the issue of climate change, where, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists, "the Bush administration has consistently sought to undermine the public's understanding of the view held by the vast majority of climate scientists" about the reality of global warming. But does anyone really think that the political debate about climate change hinges on the results of research, rather than, say, the economics of oil and the automobile, the wealth gap between rich and poor countries, or the politics of protecting tropical forests? Can we really imagine that science is somehow magically going to overcome the vested interests and conflicting values that occupy one side or the other of that debate?

One's opinions on such matters reflect not disembodied facts, but one's feelings about the trade-offs that will have to be made in achieving solutions. Personally, I'm in favor of protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, boosting research on alternative energy and raising taxes on hydrocarbons. I'm also in favor of a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy - yet I'm squeamish about the ethical and social implications of research on human genetic enhancement. These are not strictly logical and unavoidable conclusions derived from scientific facts; they are preferences that reflect the world I'd like to live in, that help determine which facts I find to be convincing and relevant.

In other words, the problem with these attacks on the Bush administration is that they hide behind the sanctity of science to advance an agenda that is itself political. What we do, or don't do, about global warming (or stem-cell research, regulation of toxic chemicals, protection of endangered species ...) will be a reflection of how we choose among competing values, and making such choices is not the job of science, but of democratic politics.

But neither the Bush administration nor its scientific critics want to give up on the pretense that these controversies are about science. To do so would be to abandon the high ground created when one can claim to have "the facts" on one's side.

The resulting charade, where everyone pretends that science can save us from politics, undermines science by turning it into nothing more than ammunition for opposing ideologies.

Even more dangerous, it damages democracy by concealing what is really at stake - our values and our interests - behind a veil of technical language and competing expertise.

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