

Bush Sends Mixed Science Signals

In mid-May, as many key science positions in the Bush administration remained vacant, Congressman Joe Baca (D-Calif.) said out loud what some of his colleagues on the House Science Committee and others in the science community were thinking: "The president has sent the very clear signal that he does not value objective scientific input in developing his positions on the most controversial decisions of his young administration. . . ."

Baca also claimed that, on 19 May, Bush "eclipsed" President Ronald Reagan's 20-year-old record for the length of time a new administration had gone without appointing anyone to the job of science adviser. Baca, a two-term member of the science committee, went on to say that, because the president's views on such issues as ballistic missile defense and global climate change run counter to "the consensus within the scientific community, it will be doubly difficult to find a competent candidate [for science adviser]."

Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.), chairman of the Science Committee, quickly challenged Baca's claim that Bush was record-breakingly slow in appointing a science adviser, noting that presidents George H. W. Bush and Reagan were actually slower. "There is no indication whatsoever that the administration has either been dragging its feet in this matter or downgrading science."

Partisanship aside, a growing concern exists among science advocates in Congress, and in the science community, about Bush's apparent lack of interest in science. As of early June, Bush had failed to find a science adviser and had not picked a director of the Department of Energy's Office of Science, the position that oversees much of the nation's physical science research.

Bush did nominate Robert Card, a corporate CEO with a master's degree in civil and environmental engineering from Stanford University and a program management degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Business, to be the undersecretary of energy. As head of the Colorado-based Kaiser-Hill Co, Card managed the \$7 billion cleanup of DOE's Rocky Flats site, and he is well regarded in the scientific community. He does not have the solid science credentials of MIT physicist Ernie Moniz, his predecessor at DOE, and that is seen by some observers as a conscious decision by the administration to bring badly needed management skills to the agency, perhaps at the expense of science. Moniz said he

respects Card and his engineering background, and added that now the physics community needs to "hold his feet to the fire in terms of supporting science programs."

While partisanship marked the arguments over the administration's slow appointment process in key science positions, both Republicans and Democrats continued to express concern about the lack of understanding of science shown in Bush's budget proposal, which hit the physical sciences hard (see PHYSICS TODAY, June 2001, page 24).

Vernon Ehlers (R-Mich.), one of two physicists in Congress, said he believes Bush did what most new administrations do—proposed new programs important to him, then realized he would need to get the funds for them from existing programs. "And, of course, one of the easy targets is science," Ehlers said. "They assume that people don't care that much about science. They don't realize there are a couple million scientists and engineers out there who care a great deal."

Ehlers said he has recommended top scientists to head DOE's Office of Science. He also suggested candidates to lead NIST, a research institute within the Department of Commerce in which he is particularly interested. Ehlers said he has been "making significant progress" in increasing funding for NIST, NSF, DOE, and the US Geological Survey.

Ehlers believes the White House has been earnestly searching for a science adviser, but asks rhetorically, "Why would anybody who held a major university presidency or was doing Nobel Prize-winning research go for a position with no budget authority and no direct access to the president?"

D. Allan Bromley, a nuclear physicist at Yale University who served as President George H. W. Bush's science adviser, said the administration is seeking high-quality candidates for the science adviser position, "but they are realizing it is more difficult than expected to get the right person."

Bromley said he expected George W. Bush would take science advice much like his father did. "When I came in, [George H. W.] Bush said, 'I don't know anything about science and technology, but I do know they are important for the nation. You tell me the few areas that are really important and I'll use the bully pulpit to promote them.'"

Bromley dismissed Baca's charge that Bush's difficulty in finding a sci-

ence adviser has been rooted in the administration's positions on science-related issues. The president's overall view of science isn't what has made it difficult to attract a top candidate, he said. Had a science adviser been in place early on, Bromley said, Bush likely wouldn't have made his "miscues on arsenic and CO₂," but those were mistakes, not reflections of science policy.

Bromley expected a science adviser to be named within weeks, which is important, he said, because that adviser helps appoint the sub-cabinet science positions. He also said the science adviser is one of 12 advisers to the president, "and if it takes a long time to appoint the person, the other advisers will have pulled their wagons into a circle and won't react well to a new person coming in."

Moniz said it is still too early to know how strongly Bush will support science. There are encouraging words from Bush officials, he said, but not much action. "The administration has stated a belief in basic science and advanced technology," he said. "But the talk hasn't been walked."

Moniz noted that, under Clinton, science advisers Jack Gibbons and Neal Lane were both part of the president's inner circle and he hoped the same would be true for Bush. "From what I've read, it is the style of operating in this White House to have a much tighter group involved in advising the president than in the past. So that may lead to a very different role for the science adviser, and possibly a lesser role."

Richard Russell, staff director of the White House science office, said Bush's science adviser, when chosen, will indeed be at the same high level as in the past and will be listened to by the president. "We're working hard [to name an adviser]. It is a priority. Unfortunately, we can't say one way or the other where things stand."

JIM DAWSON

NEWS NOTES

Visa limit lifted. Universities, nonprofits, and government research facilities are no longer subject to the annual cap on H1-B visas, thanks to the American Competitiveness in the Twenty-First Century Act that passed last October. H1-B visas are intended for immigrants in specialty occupations—most of the visas are used for computer-related jobs. The new act also makes it easier for those already on an H1-B visa to switch jobs and raises the cap on other H1-Bs to 195 000 for fiscal year 2002.