

Push for Kerry by Scientists Draws Republican Ire

A growing number of politically active scientists, dismayed with how science has fared under the Bush administration, are urging their colleagues to work for John Kerry.

Physicist Burton Richter was in his office at SLAC, both growling and laughing as he was read a comment from powerful Michigan Republican Congressman Nick Smith that described the Nobel laureate as a “passionate liberal ideologue.” Representative Smith, chairman of the House Research Subcommittee, released a statement attacking Richter as part of the Republican response to a 21 June letter from 48 Nobel Prize winners highly critical of the Bush administration’s science policies. The Nobel

letter went on to endorse Senator John Kerry (D-MA) for president.

But Richter was in good company. Smith, trying to blunt the impact of the letter, went on to say that although the “Nobel Prize winning endorsers” claim to be “speaking on behalf of the welfare of science and discovery itself,” it is “clear that these scientists are, collectively, also passionate liberal ideologues with an extensive record of support for the Democratic Party.”

“It’s unfortunate,” Richter said,

“that [Smith] reads ideological differences into some rational opposition to the administration’s policies.” Richter went on to say that the last time he had dinner at the White House was at the invitation of President Ronald Reagan. He also noted that he’d published an opinion piece supporting Bush’s withdrawal from the Kyoto accords on global warming—hardly the action of a liberal ideologue.

Richter, the former head of SLAC, has spent years in Washington’s corridors of power encouraging lawmakers to support SLAC, particle physics programs in general, and, more recently, the Department of Energy’s Office of Science. He is one of a handful of politically savvy, elite scientists

Projected R&D Cuts Alarm Science Community

At the 8 July press conference during which the Union of Concerned Scientists unleashed its latest broadside of charges claiming misuse and abuse of science within the Bush administration, a reporter asked UCS Board Chairman Kurt Gottfried if the complaints didn’t really stem from a perceived lack of federal funding for much of science. After all, the reporter said, Office of Science and Technology Policy Director John Marburger has repeatedly pointed to record R&D spending by the administration.

Gottfried suggested that the reporter carefully look through the UCS report. “I believe . . . you will find that the word ‘funding’ doesn’t appear,” he said. The issue, he continued, is the distortion of science, not its funding.

Although that is true of the UCS report, there is widespread concern in the science community about the administration’s funding of the sciences—particularly the physical sciences. Henry Kelly, president of the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), said that concern was heightened even further by an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) analysis of the administration’s science funding projections. That analysis, based on numbers in an Office of Management and Budget (OMB) memo leaked to the media in late May, portrays a bleak five years for almost all nondefense science funding and, according to several scientists, has played a role in mobilizing many in the scientific community against the administration.

The AAAS analysis states its key finding this way: “The

Bush Administration’s plan to reduce the federal deficit in half over the next five years would cut R&D funding for 9 out of the 12 largest R&D funding agencies in real terms over the next five years, with the steepest cuts in [fiscal year] 2006 after this year’s election.” Administration officials say the projections don’t accurately reflect future budget requests. An OSTP official pointed to FY2002 projections for science agencies that showed FY 2005 numbers that were significantly lower than the administration actually proposed in its latest budget. Despite the administration’s claims, the AAAS analysis concludes that if the OMB guidelines are followed, “nondefense R&D outside NASA and DHS [Department of Homeland Security] would decline steeply in FY 2006 unless there is either a change in the White House or a major change in Bush Administration policy.”

Some of the AAAS highlights reveal the nature of the proposed cuts, all adjusted for expected inflation:

- ▶ The nondefense R&D portfolio, excluding NASA and DHS increases, would fall by 6.7%.
- ▶ Over the five-year period, National Institutes of Health funding—which was doubled between 1998 and 2003—would fall by 5.8%.
- ▶ The Office of Science R&D budget at the Department of Energy, flat for the past four years, would fall 9.5%. Intense efforts by physicist Burton Richter and other American Physical Society members over the past two years to boost that

funding were credited by Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham with “avoiding a doomsday scenario.”

- ▶ The NSF budget would see a slight boost in FY 2005, but by 2009 would fall by 4.7%.

“If you look at the AAAS research forecast,” Kelly said, “basically everything takes a knock except NASA, homeland security, and defense, and even in defense the basic research funds are under attack. There really is a legitimate concern about whether the pipeline is continuing to be filled. You have to look to the future and ask, Are we jeopardizing our leadership—not this year, but two years from now, or a decade from now?”

Jim Dawson

