

In his March 2021 report “The undermining of science is Trump’s legacy” (page 24), David Kramer conflates science itself with his personal preference for the government planning of scientific research. They are two different things.

Throughout the piece, Kramer smuggles in his own value judgments about what governments should do regarding science. For combating climate change, for example, he ranks the 2015 Paris Agreement highly. Another person with the same understanding of and appreciation for climate science might prefer, for whatever reason, that governments do the opposite of what Kramer wants. (Murray Rothbard’s essay “Law, property rights, and air pollution” provides insight into environmentalism without interventionism.¹)

Similar implied value judgments hold for Kramer’s comments on federal budgets and workforce: It is not interfering with scientific research to cut federal funding. Tax-funded research funnels resources into what Kramer ostensibly deems important. But all goods are scarce, so what is the opportunity cost—that is, what scientific research is not performed in other areas? No one can say. Kramer is suggesting that governments should determine the amount and direction of societal spending on scientific research, and others may simply have different opinions.

Kramer’s report is not about undermining objective science itself. Rather, it is a description of the high subjective value he places on government-directed scientific research.

Reference

1. M. N. Rothbard, *Cato J.* **2**, 55 (1982).

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If I have learned anything about scientific writing in my 35-year career, it is that scientists should be careful when writing on matters of politics and public policy. We tend to be too cocksure of our own thinly vetted opinions and present them poorly to boot. David Kramer’s report “The undermining of science is Trump’s legacy” (March 2021, page 24) is an unfortunate example.

For starters, facts presented in the piece do not support the title. About a full page in, Kramer admits that funding for science increased 10–20% under Donald Trump. That does not undermine science.

The story quotes representative Bill Foster (D-IL), who has a PhD in physics, on the “searing pain” of the Trump years. A check of Foster’s record shows that in the 2019–20 Congress he voted with Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) 100% of the time. His credentials as a physicist notwithstanding, his opinion is better understood politically, not scientifically.

The story makes several egregious assertions without any backing. For example, Kramer writes that “Trump sidelined Anthony Fauci . . . and Deborah Birx In their place, he installed Scott Atlas, a radiologist who argued that the virus should be allowed to spread largely unimpeded.” That is a bizarre take on the facts! Fauci, not Atlas, was, and is, the governmental face of the pandemic response. And has there ever been a more aggressive effort to impede the spread of a virus? Most any unbiased individual would applaud Trump for seeking a variety of opinions. The ideas of Atlas—who is much more than “a radiologist”¹—were neither flippant nor influential.

Kramer states that “an indisputable legacy of the Trump administration was an unparalleled level of political interference with science—data disappeared, scientists were silenced,” Those are serious charges, but the lack of examples to back them up suggests to the thoughtful reader that there are no indisputable examples to give. Kramer’s “most far-reaching example of attempted interference” apparently centers on the Harvard Six Cities study on pollution and health and its reliance on confidential raw data. That controversy started in 2009 and extended through the Obama years;² it is hardly a Trump-era issue.

In fairness to Kramer, the Six Cities study was reviewed by an independent panel that agreed with its results. In

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fairness to Trump, the principle of transparency should be praised and the data used in formulating public policy should be made public, even if it requires redaction. That is especially true for medical science, where evidence shows that a significant number of classic studies cannot be reproduced.³

Most people act in good faith. Those whom you dislike are rarely as evil as you might want them to be. Give credit where it is due. And back up criticism with your own transparency. That is the way of science.

References

1. See R. E. Heller III, "Op-Ed: Atlas shrugged? The legacy of Scott Atlas, MD," *MedPage Today* (20 December 2020).
2. See E. A. Grant, *Harvard Public Health* (fall 2012), p. 30.
3. See M. Baker, *Nature* **533**, 452 (2016).

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Origins of the asteroid-impact hypothesis

The April 2021 Back Scatter, "Iridium marks the spot" (page 64), should have given credit to Luis Alvarez, Walter Alvarez, and their team, who proposed the hypothesis that an asteroid impact caused the mass extinction event 66 million years ago, and cited their publication.¹

I was present at conferences where the Alvarez team was ridiculed and insulted because a physicist (Luis Alvarez) dared to intrude on geologists' turf. The team did meticulous research and global checking of the iridium anomaly at the Cretaceous–Paleogene (K–Pg) boundary (or Cretaceous–Tertiary boundary, as it was known in the 1980s). I am glad that that careful work has been independently verified many times over. But the work mentioned in the Back Scatter is not new news, just further confirmation. Please give credit where it is due.

Reference

1. L. W. Alvarez et al., *Science* **208**, 1095 (1980).

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