



The Republican War on Science

By Chris Mooney

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Science has never been more crucial to deciding the political issues facing the country. Yet science and scientists have less influence with the federal government than at any time since Richard Nixon fired his science advisors. In the White House and Congress today, findings are reported in a politicized manner; spun or distorted to fit the speaker's agenda; or, when they're too inconvenient, ignored entirely. On a broad array of issues-stem cell research, climate change, evolution, sex education, product safety, environmental regulation, and many others-the Bush administration's positions fly in the face of overwhelming scientific consensus. Federal science agencies-once fiercely independent under both Republican and Democratic presidents-are increasingly staffed by political appointees who know industry lobbyists and evangelical activists far better than they know the science. This is not unique to the Bush administration, but it is largely a Republican phenomenon, born of a conservative dislike of environmental, health, and safety regulation, and at the extremes, of evolution and legalized abortion. In *The Republican War on Science*, Chris Mooney ties together the disparate strands of the attack on science into a compelling and frightening account of our government's increasing unwillingness to distinguish between legitimate research and ideologically driven pseudoscience.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Does the Bush administration ignore or deny mainstream research to please its conservative base? Have business groups and certain religious lobbies helped it do so? Does Bush-era treatment of scientists differ from that of Clinton, George H.W. Bush and Reagan? Has a Republican Congress passed laws designed to disable clean air and water efforts, and has it dismantled safeguards, such as the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, meant to give legislators unbiased advice? Mooney's passionate, thoroughly researched volume answers these questions with an urgent "yes." A former *American Prospect* writer who is making his book debut, Mooney uses interviews and old-fashioned document-digging to explain how, over two decades, right-wing politicians built institutions designed to discredit working scientists; how some energy companies have allied themselves with powerful Republicans (such as Sen. James Inhofe of Oklahoma) to block or reverse U.S. steps to curb global warming; and how the present administration defies expert consensus on climate change, on mercury pollution, even on how to read statistics. Mooney tracks Bush White House efforts to spread misinformation about stem cells; the work of religious right regulators like Dr. David Hager (formerly on the FDA's Reproductive Health Drugs advisory committee) in restricting access to birth control; and the attempts of the Discovery Institute (and other think tanks linked to the Bush base) to fight the teaching of evolution. In the past five years, Mooney documents, many formerly apolitical physicists, biologists and doctors have come to believe there is a "pattern" of science abuse under Bush, a push back against the methods of science itself. Conservatives may react with indignation; liberals, moderates and working scientists will find few surprises, but Mooney's very readable, and understandably partisan, volume is the first to put the whole story, thoroughly documented, in one place.

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From Scientific American

Thomas Jefferson would be appalled. More than two centuries after he helped to shape a government based on the idea that reason and technological advancement would propel the new United States into a glorious future, the political party that now controls that government has largely turned its back on science. Even as the country and the planet face both scientifically complex threats and remarkable technological opportunities, many Republican officeholders reject the most reliable sources of information and analysis available to guide the nation. As inconceivable as it would have been to Jefferson--and as dismaying as it is to growing legions of today's scientists--large swaths of the government in Washington are now in the hands of people who don't know what science is. More ominously, some of those in power may grasp how research works but nonetheless are willing to subvert science's knowledge and expert opinion for short-term political and economic gains. That is the thesis of *The Republican War on Science*, by Chris Mooney, one of the few journalists in the country who specialize in the now dangerous intersection of science and politics. His book is a well-researched, closely argued and amply referenced indictment of the right wing's assault on science and scientists. Mooney's chronicle of what he calls "science abuse" begins in the 1970s with Richard Nixon and picks up steam with Ronald Reagan. But both pale in comparison to the current Bush administration, which in four years has:

- * Rejected the scientific consensus on global warming and suppressed an EPA report supporting that consensus.

* Stacked numerous advisory committees with industry representatives and members of the religious Right.

* Begun deploying a missile defense system without evidence that it can work.

* Banned funding for embryonic stem cell research except on a claimed 60 cell lines already in existence, most of which turned out not to exist.

* Forced the National Cancer Institute to say that abortion may cause breast cancer, a claim refuted by good studies.

* Ordered the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to remove information about condom use and efficacy from its Web site. Mooney explores these and many other examples, including George W. Bush's support for creationism. In almost every instance, Republican leaders have branded the scientific mainstream as purveyors of "junk science" and dubbed an extremist viewpoint--always at the end of the spectrum favoring big business or the religious Right--"sound science." One of the most insidious achievements of the Right, Mooney shows, is the Data Quality Act of 2000--just two sentences, written by an industry lobbyist and quietly inserted into an appropriations bill. It directs the White House's Office of Management and Budget to ensure that all information put out by the federal government is reliable. The law seems sensible, except in practice. It is used mainly by industry and right-wing think tanks to block release of government reports unfavorable to their interests by claiming they do not contain "sound science." For all its hostility to specific scientific findings, the Right never says it opposes science. It understands the cachet in the word. Perhaps Republicans sense what pollsters have known for decades--that the American public is overwhelmingly positive about science and that there is nothing to be gained by opposing a winner. Instead the Right exploits a misconception about science common among nonscientists--a belief that uncertainty in findings indicates fatally flawed research. Because most cutting-edge science--including most research into currently controversial topics--is uncertain, it is dismissed as junk. This naive understanding of science hands the Right a time-tested tactic. It does not claim that business interests or moral values trump the scientific consensus. Rather rightists argue that the consensus itself is flawed. Then they encourage a debate between the consensus and the extremist naysayers, giving the two apparently equal weight. Thus, Mooney argues, it seems reasonable to split the difference or simply to argue that there is too much uncertainty to, say, ban a suspect chemical or fund a controversial form of research. The Republican War on Science details political and regulatory debates that can be arcane and complex, engrossing reading only for dedicated policy wonks. Thankfully, Mooney is both a wonk and a clear writer. He covered many of the battles in real time for publications such as the Washington Post, Washington Monthly, Mother Jones and American Prospect. "When politicians use bad science to justify themselves rather than good science to make up their minds," Mooney writes, "we can safely assume that wrongheaded and even disastrous decisions lie ahead." Thomas Jefferson would, indeed, be appalled. Writing in 1799 to a young student whom he was mentoring, the patriot advised the man to study science and urged him to reject the "doctrine which the present despots of the earth are inculcating," that there is nothing new to be learned. He concluded by saying opposition to "freedom and science would be such a monstrous phenomenon as I cannot place among possible things in this age and this country."

Boyce Rensberger directs the Knight Science Journalism Fellowships at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and teaches in M.I.T.'s Graduate Program in Science Writing. For many years he was a science reporter and editor at the Washington Post.

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A book titled *The Republican War on Science* is bound to court controversy, and whether critics liked the book or not surely reflected their own political views and opinion of the current administration. Nonetheless, most reviewers believed that Mooney makes a convincing case that the GOP has launched a systematic assault against unbiased scientific inquiry and that it allows dogma to drive public policy. But critics viewed with skepticism Mooney's contention that the political right has a virtual monopoly on such behavior and claimed that he offered too few examples of the left's scientific malfeasance. Mooney tries to put the GOP on trial, but a few holdouts keep him from scoring a conviction.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Renee Wood:

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Salvatore Anthony:

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