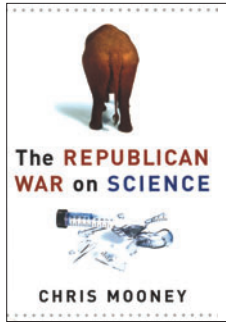


The wake-up call



The Republican War on Science

Chris Mooney

Basic Books, 2005
342 pp., hardcover, \$24.95
ISBN 0465046754

Reviewed by Michael Stebbins

Most scientists in the US believe that politicians in the neoconservative movement are actively ignoring the advice of the scientific community and distorting scientific results to suit a political agenda that serves the religious right and corporate interests. The term 'evil' is often thrown around to describe the current Bush administration and the cronyism within his party. But, to date, these opinions have been based on scattered reports that detail individual instances of poor behavior on the part of conservatives. In *The Republican War on Science*, journalist Chris Mooney painstakingly documents the roots of the efforts to undercut the influence of science on national policy and the relentless politicization of US science policy by conservatives working on behalf of the Republican Party. This book should serve as a harsh wake-up call to the scientific community and the American public at large that the heady days of science in the ivory tower must end if we are to effectively fight this lunacy.

Mooney clearly documents the intimate details of the Bush administration's attacks on the integrity of science information such as denying the existence of global warming, forcing the National Cancer Institute to post information implying a link between abortion and breast cancer, questioning the effectiveness of condom use for preventing pregnancy and disease, deploying missile-defense systems that have been shown not to work, falsely claiming that there is little promise in embryonic stem cell research, undercutting the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act, and stacking agencies and advisory committees with unqualified ideologues. If this book was just a laundry list of offenses, it would still be important—but it goes further.

Mooney could have written an entire book about the current administration's abuse of science and health information. Instead, he provides the necessary context for the current abuse by detailing the shrewd, but arguably immoral, tactics of conservative Republicans who insist on "sound science" while rebuking "junk science" with little regard to the quality of the data and overreaching opinion of the scientific community. The roots of the artful undercutting techniques used are established through detailed examples from the past 40 years. Although it is unclear

which players truly don't understand the science they are championing or denying, and who actually understands science but will manipulate it for short-term political or economic gain, the question quickly becomes moot when the results of their efforts are viewed from above. Mooney's documentation of the willful manipulation of science on the part of conservatives to suit an agenda is well supported and nauseating.

One of the more interesting chapters of the book is a profile of a happy-go-lucky Republican lobbyist, Jim Tozzi, who worked in the White House Office of Management and Budget from the Nixon to Reagan administrations. Tozzi is credited with having a central role in undercutting the science that showed that secondhand smoke is bad for people and that the Earth's temperature is rising as a result of human activity. Tozzi also had a central role in passing the infamous Data Quality Act that has created a regulatory paralysis for government agencies, shutting down their ability to regulate business by creating a cumbersome set of rules for dealing with scientific data. Contrary to what many may think, Tozzi comes off as an incredibly likable man whose charm has allowed him to work behind the scenes in Washington to influence national policy.

Several critics have conjured two basic weaknesses in this book that are worth addressing. First, they claim that it does not explain the actual science that is being thwarted by the conservative movement in the US. Second, they claim that the book is lopsided and does not document the misuse of science by democrats and liberals. The first criticism misses the point of the book entirely. Mr. Mooney is a journalist, not a scientist, and the aim of the book is not to provide clarity or even a scientific opinion, but to document an American sickness. Here, Mooney triumphs. The second criticism is simply not true. Mooney does take the Clinton administration and environmentalist groups like Greenpeace to task on several issues. But the book shows convincingly that conservative Republicans have been manipulating science wholesale compared to Democrats and moderate Republicans and that this manipulation has increased exponentially under the control of the Bush administration.

In the final chapter, Mooney provides advice for remedying the situation. His suggestions are sound and well thought out, but seem more an afterthought than a real goal of the book. A problem here is that his suggestions are a prescription for treating the symptoms of our national disease, not the root causes. Yes, there is clearly a need for reforming the media and reestablishing the Office of Technology Assessment, which used to provide advice to Congress, but was dismantled under the reign of former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. True change will require a defined and coordinated effort to oust any elected official who defiles science or health information. This could start at the grassroots level with every scientist dedicating one page of their lab website to an issue of science and health policy and making the scientific facts absolutely clear.

The scientific community has to hold politicians to higher standards, the standards used by practicing scientists, and has to speak up. If this sounds like preaching to the choir, then you may not have noticed that the choir is not singing loud and clear. If we don't use books like this as fuel for action, then we will simply wind up collectively waiting out the Bush tenure, which will not result in change, just more of the same.

The author is at the Federation of American Scientists, Washington, DC 20036, USA.

E-mail: mstebbins@fas.org