

APPENDIX IV

TAB V

Intelligent Denials

Bush's science adviser said one important thing about politicized science in a recent appearance. But only one.

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When it's your job to serve as the president's in-house expert on science and technology, being constantly in the media spotlight isn't necessarily a mark of distinction. But for President Bush's stoically inclined science adviser John Marburger, immense controversy followed his blanket dismissal last year of allegations (now endorsed by 48 Nobel laureates) that the administration has systematically abused science. So it was more than a little refreshing last Wednesday to hear Marburger take a strong stance against science politicization and abuse on one issue where it really matters: evolution.

Speaking at the annual conference of the National Association of Science Writers, Marburger fielded an audience question about "Intelligent Design" (ID), the latest supposedly scientific alternative to Charles Darwin's theory of descent with modification. The White House's chief scientist stated point blank, "Intelligent Design is not a scientific theory." And that's not all -- as if to ram the point home, Marburger soon continued, "I don't regard Intelligent Design as a scientific topic."

Marburger's words mark a departure for this administration. While campaigning for the presidency in 1999, then-Governor Bush stroked his religiously conservative followers by defending the teaching of creationism alongside evolution and stating, "I believe children ought to be exposed to different theories about how the world started." And in response to a question from Science magazine during the 2004 race, Bush's campaign ducked the ID issue by stating, "The federal government has no control over local curricula, and it is not the federal government's role to tell states and local boards of education what they should teach in the classroom."

In comparison with these statements, Marburger minced no words about the scientific status of ID. In fact, GOP Intelligent Design boosters like Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania (where a court case over ID is now pending) may be extremely miffed by Marburger's stance.

Alas, Marburger's forthrightness about ID wasn't matched by his discussion (or lack thereof) of charges that the Bush administration has systematically abused and distorted scientific information.

At the National Association of Science Writers session, Marburger shared the stage with Representative Henry Waxman, a Democrat who has relentlessly pursued and publicized allegations that the administration has interfered with the process by which scientific advice makes its way to policy-makers. Speaking prior to Marburger, Waxman slammed the Bush administration for abuses ranging from the stacking of scientific advisory panels to monkeying with research on mercury pollution. The congressman also charged that Marburger's previously published rebuttal to charges of science abuse -- delivered in response to a statement and report on the subject last year by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) -- amounted to "asserted denials with little supporting evidence."

When Marburger took the stage he ignored Waxman's stark criticisms entirely, as if they somehow didn't merit addressing. Instead, the president's science adviser delivered a delightful speech about "four challenges" for science journalism. The disconnect was stunning, and generally continued throughout the question and answer session, during which Marburger dodged Waxman repeatedly.

In truth, Marburger's elusiveness may reflect considerable wisdom. Considering that new tales of Bush administration science abuse seem to pop up regularly, this probably isn't a debate he can win.

Just last week, in fact, some of the most stunning evidence yet emerged concerning the Bush administration's treatment of science and government scientists, courtesy of the UCS and the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). At the center of the controversy was the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), a branch of the Interior Department charged with enforcement of the Endangered Species Act.

Determining how and whether to protect species necessarily depends on using scientific analyses to find out if they're in peril and what's causing the problem. And as now seems clear, the Bush FWS has repeatedly sought to doctor the data in order to prevent tougher endangered-species protections that rankle various industry constituencies -- development, ranching, mining, logging, and so on.

The UCS and PEER sent surveys about science politicization to more than a thousand FWS scientists, and received some 400 back. Almost half of the respondents reported that they had been "directed, for non-scientific reasons, to refrain from making [findings] that are protective of species." One out of five added that they had been "directed to inappropriately exclude or alter technical information from a USFWS scientific document." Half said they were aware of cases in which "commercial interests have inappropriately induced the reversal or withdrawal of scientific conclusions or decisions through political intervention." And so on.

This is damning stuff, and reflects a clear sense among many government scientists that politics has corrupted the science-based endangered-species-protection process. Granted, it's possible that every single one of these Fish and Wildlife Service survey respondents has an ax to grind. But it isn't very likely.

Marburger wasn't asked about these survey results last week. But given his consistency in defending the White House in the past, one suspects he would echo arguments already offered by the Interior Department -- the agencies weren't acting inappropriately, it's OK for superiors to review the scientific conclusions of scientists working under them, this happens all the time, etc. Yawn.

Thank goodness that on evolution, at least, Marburger strays from the pack.

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