

Science Arrives in Government—A Bit Late

Several months ago in this space, *Science* complained that the Bush administration had been uncommonly languid in nominating candidates for the leading science positions in our government. What already looked like a slow process in June appeared positively viscous by September, but limited relief was in sight: On 23 October, the president finally got a Science Adviser, when the Senate confirmed Dr. John Marburger as the director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP).

This brought somewhat reassuring news: Appointments deferred are not necessarily appointments denied. President Bush has chosen slowly but well; Dr. Marburger is a physicist with a fine research record and an open management style that has won him praise in leading a national laboratory and a university. He will be a Science Adviser well worth listening to; the question is, will the president listen? The history of this relationship is mixed, giving minimal guidance about how this particular one will work. The presently moribund status of the President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology (the committee that is supposed to give the president external science advice) gives little encouragement.

Besides welcoming Dr. Marburger, it is only fair to salute those who manned the OSTP fort during an unnecessarily protracted interregnum. Prominent among the Clintonian refugees who soldiered on was Rosina Bierbaum, the thoughtful associate director for Environment who worked hard and effectively on issues of climate change, oceans policy, and science education. She served as acting director before moving on to the deanship of the School of Natural Sciences at the University of Michigan. She was succeeded by another transitional appointee, Clifford Gabriel, who performed creditably though briefly in that thankless job. Both deserve the gratitude of the scientific community.

That is about all the nice talk I can summon in this situation, because a large number of important science posts are still unfilled. We don't have a director for the Office of Science in the Department of Energy—a job formerly well filled by Martha Krebs and then by Mildred Dresselhaus. Even more important vacancies, given the recent course of events, are in the leadership slots for Public Health Service agencies. We don't have a director of the National Institutes of Health, and three of its constituent institutes now lack bosses. We don't have a commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration.

Well, we do have a Surgeon General. He is David Satcher, a knowledgeable physician. Unfortunately, this holdover from the Clinton administration was locked in the closet by the new management during the first weeks of the anthrax scare. This allowed the secretary of Health and Human Services to provide information to the American people about the threat they were facing and the capacity of our public health infrastructure to deal with it. He first testified to Senator Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) that we were in fine shape, a pronouncement that produced a memorable TV moment of candid incredulity, when the senator came right out and said he didn't believe him. Then in later appearances, after there was evident trouble, Secretary Thompson demonstrated a knowledge of infectious disease that was about what one would expect from someone whose primary government experience has been in welfare reform.

The confusion accompanying the anthrax mess has been bad enough, but it should have come as no surprise. The lack of scientific leadership in government had already produced serious mistakes: the isolation of the United States from meaningful participation in global climate policy and the misreporting of the number and character of available embryonic stem cell lines after the 9 August decision to limit such research to lines that already existed.

It is a depressing record. Dr. Marburger has a real chance to make it better, and we wish him the best. But of course one person alone cannot accomplish the needed improvement. There is much to be done, and the requirement for sound science advice spans a broad range of disciplines. Among these, none are more compellingly urgent than those related to the public health. Thus we hope that the new Science Adviser has both access and influence within the Executive Office complex; he might begin to deploy it with the following piece of advice for the president: "Please, let's fill those vacancies!"



John Marburger

Donald Kennedy