

Science's Political Bulldog

Representative Henry A. Waxman blasts away at the White House for alleged abuse of science. Sure, it's politics—but it could restore confidence in the scientific process By JULIE WAKEFIELD

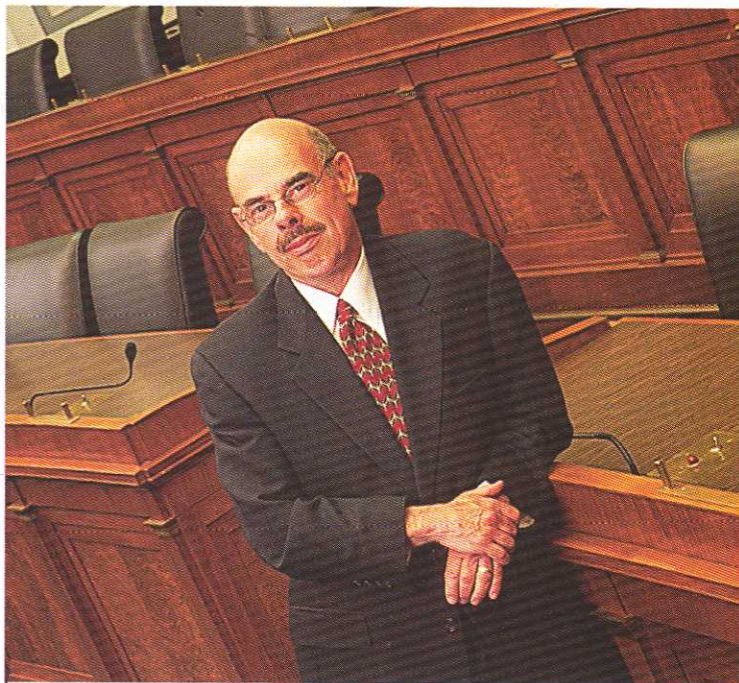
To hear Henry A. Waxman bemoan how predetermined beliefs are jeopardizing scientific freedom, you might think you are in another age or in some struggling new country. But there, outside his corner office, is the gleaming dome of the Capitol, its perimeter tightened with bollards and the latest surveillance. "Science is very much under attack with the Bush administration," Waxman declares from his suite in the Rayburn Office Building. "If the science doesn't fit what the White House

wants it to be, it distorts the science to fit into what its preconceived notions are about what it wants to do."

As the ranking minority member on the House Government Reform Committee, the 64-year-old California Democrat has become a leading voice railing against the White House's science policy—or lack thereof. The charges are not new—word of such politicization began percolating almost as soon as George W. Bush took office, and until recently, many scientists who complained in private held their tongues in public. Waxman has given scientists' fears a voice, and a growing crowd of scientific organizations, advocacy groups and former officials are adding to the chorus.

Waxman launched his first formal salvo last August. Pulling together reports and editorials from various sources (including *Scientific American*), his office issued a report detailing political interference in more than 20 areas affecting health, environmental and other research agencies. Examples include deleting information from Web sites, stacking advisory committees with candidates with uncertain qualifications and questionable industry ties, and suppressing information and projects inconvenient to White House policy goals, such as those having to do with global warming. And he charges that the beneficiaries of these distortions are for the most part Bush's political supporters, including the Traditional Values Coalition, a church-based policy group in Washington, D.C., and oil lobbyists.

To Waxman, who became interested in health issues in 1969 when he was appointed to the California State Assembly Health Committee, the assaults on the National Institutes of Health are especially offensive. For example, after prompting by Republican members of Congress, NIH officials started contacting a "hit list" of 150 investigators compiled by the Traditional Values Coalition. The organization charged that the NIH was funding smarmy sex studies and denounced the projects that look at such behaviors as truck-stop prostitution and the sexual habits of seniors.



HENRY A. WAXMAN: KEEPING HOUSE

- Entered Congress in 1974 with other reform-minded Democrats who swept into office in the midterm elections after Watergate.
- Holds degrees in political science and in law from the University of California at Los Angeles.
- On his career: "My parents would have preferred that I be a doctor rather than a lawyer and then later a congressman. But that wasn't my strength."

Although no grants were rescinded, many viewed the calls as an attempt to stifle the scientific process, considering that all 200 of the grants in question had already undergone peer review. At the University of California at San Francisco, where about 17 investigators were contacted, the message was clear: "Look out: Big Brother is watching," recounts Keith R. Yamamoto, executive vice dean at the medical school.

"I just think we need to make sure the jewel of U.S. government policy—the NIH, which I think is a national treasure—not be hurt in any way by those who would try to inject politics into scientific research," Waxman states. NIH officials declined to comment for this story. But in a previous interview, NIH director Elias A. Zerhouni stated that he has not seen many solid cases of political interference and invited researchers who encountered such pressure to come forward [see "A Biomedical Politician," by Carol Ezzell, *Insights*, September 2003].

Beyond grants, scientific publishing also seems to be under fire. The Office of Foreign Assets Control, part of the U.S. Treasury, has pressured professional organizations—such as the American Society for Microbiology and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers—to virtually ban papers originating in Iran, Cuba, Sudan and Libya. The rationale: the ban is part of the U.S. trade embargo policy with these countries. Publishing their papers requires special licenses.

Perhaps more contentious is the Office of Management and Budget's proposal to centrally peer-review the science behind new federal regulations. The plan, which could be implemented by the summer, is a way to "enhance the competence and credibility of science used by regulators," according to John D. Graham, an OMB administrator. For example, "the lack of adequate peer review contributed to childhood deaths due to passenger air bag deployment," Graham says—specifically, federal agencies failed to consider risk assessments performed by automakers indicating that kids seated in cars with passenger air bags need to be restrained properly in the back seat.

Critics such as Waxman see it differently. They call the proposal an insidious way to use scientific uncertainty to stall regulations that are likely to be costly to industry by adding layers of review—and by including potentially biased ones. "It's very heavy-handed of the OMB to come in and regulate peer review," Waxman charges. Moreover, he adds, the OMB's notion of the process has fallen short in the recent past. In the debate over the environment, the Bush administration has quashed findings that run counter to policy decisions. And its actions extend beyond its rejection of the Kyoto protocol. For example, the White House suppressed for several months a 2003 Environmental Protection Agency report detailing that a Senate Clean Air bill would prevent substantially more deaths from mercury conta-

mination than the administration's proposed Clear Skies Act.

The Union of Concerned Scientists outlined these and other allegations in a report issued this February. Along with the report, 62 prominent scientists—including Nobel laureates and National Medal of Science winners—signed a statement calling for the restoration of scientific integrity to federal policymaking.

"The peer-review situation at the OMB is frightening on many levels," says Neal Lane, a signatory of the statement who headed the National Science Foundation and served as presidential science adviser under Bill Clinton. "The integrity of information is going to be seriously undermined in a process that requires political approval." He points out that whereas the heads of the NIH and other far-flung agencies are all political appointees, the OMB is part of the White House.

Although science has historically been political to some degree, "it's unprecedented what we're now seeing," Waxman contends. "We've had people from the Nixon administration,

Republicans who served in the EPA"—Russell E. Train and William D. Ruckelshaus—"decry what's being done."

Some scholars remain skeptical about whether science has become more political. "When people are seeking political

advantage, there isn't much that is sacred," observes economist Lester Lave of Carnegie Mellon University. "Since scientists enjoy a positive reputation with the public, members of Congress and other decision makers, there is some attempt to line up Nobel Prize winners, professional society presidents or large numbers of university people to support or oppose a position. There is nothing new here." And even Lane notes a considerable amount of "polemic" mixed with the concrete cases of interference outlined in Waxman's August report.

Bush administration officials have countered that Waxman himself is using scientists' concerns for his own political gain. "He's just playing politics by continuing to attack the president's policies. He's not offering constructive ways to enhance science policy," says Mary Ellen Grant, a spokesperson for the Republican National Committee.

Waxman is undeterred. As he did in many of his past reform campaigns, he established a "tipline" for scientists to register additional examples of politicization. But he has not been able to round up support for congressional hearings as he did against the tobacco industry in 1994. The Republican congressional majority's lack of interest in the issue has frustrated him. Still, he hopes to effect change: "It should be enough to bring it under public scrutiny, because [the administration] can't defend those kinds of actions." ■

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