

US Weapons Systems: Bush Policies Undermine Science, Group Says

Fed. officials fabricated scientific data, suppressed findings, pressured scientists to change reports

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Bush Policies Undermine Science, Group Says

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BOSTON — The Bush administration's persistent interference in the work of federal scientists has cut experts out of top-level discussions of bioterrorism and served to punish researchers who questioned one White House nuclear weapon initiative, a science watchdog organization said yesterday (see [GSN](#), May 10, 2007).

During the first day of a major science conference here, the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a [report](#) accusing the executive branch of committing a host of abuses over the last seven years.

Included among 17 distinct charges are allegations that federal officials misrepresented or simply fabricated scientific data, suppressed certain findings, and pressured scientists to change reports in favor of administration positions.

"This interference in science threatens our nation's ability to respond to complex challenges to public health, the environment and national security," states the report, *Federal Science and the Public Good*. "It risks demoralizing the federal scientific work force and raises the possibility of lasting harm to the federal scientific enterprise. More importantly, it betrays public trust in our government and undermines the democratic principles upon which this nation was founded."

Physicist Kurt Gottfried, chairman of the organization's Board of Directors, argued that this behavior is indicative of Bush administration procedure in sectors ranging from economics to arms control.

"I think more broadly than science the administration has tried and often succeeded in distorting and manipulating expert opinion that contradicts its chosen policies or that contradicts the views of some of its important constituencies," he said in an interview on the sidelines of the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

While this is true to some degree of all presidents, it has become far more systemic in this White House, Gottfried said. The organization points to the elimination of two panels formed to provide federal agencies with expert advice on weapons issues as evidence of this posture.

The National Nuclear Security Administration, the semiautonomous arm of the Energy Department that oversees the U.S. nuclear complex, in June 2003 abolished a 2-year-old advisory panel filled with atomic weapons experts.

Some physicists on the panel had written articles questioning the Bush administration's research on a nuclear "bunker buster," a weapon intended to destroy hardened, underground targets. The experts warned that such weapons might not prove effective but would create high levels of radioactive fallout, the UCS report says.

The agency made its displeasure with the articles known, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists. While acknowledging it is not "provable," Gottfried argued that there was a clear connection between those pieces and the subsequent dismissal of the panel.

NNSA spokesman Bryan Wilkes rejected the organization's claims on several points, starting with the report's statement that "White House officials" disbanded the committee. The first NNSA administrator formed the group as a source for technical advice; his successor had significantly more experience in nuclear weapons and nonproliferation issues and allowed the panel's charter to lapse, he said. Any articles critical of the bunker buster would have been "irrelevant," Wilkes said, also denying that the agency's work on the weapon had gone beyond the feasibility study stage.

"They don't have their facts right. They're wrong," he said.

Formal pursuit of the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator ended in 2006 (see [GSN](#), March 24, 2006).

A longtime State Department advisory committee on arms control was also disbanded shortly after Bush took office, the organization says on its [Web site](#).

Gottfried used the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty to illustrate the level of expertise that members of these panels could provide. The experts would be able to discuss with policy-makers detection capabilities for underground nuclear blasts, the consequences for failing to detect a test and what a nation's leaders might learn from setting off a weapon without being caught, he said.

While NNSA managers can reasonably say they have access to a significant amount of expertise through the national nuclear laboratories, there is always value in hearing independent voices who can speak freely without worrying about how their opinion might affect their future, Gottfried said. The State Department could not claim to have the same technical resources when it cut the arms control panel, he added.

The position of presidential science adviser has lost standing under the Bush administration, the organization claims. Losing its "near-Cabinet-level" status meant less access to President George W. Bush and reduced influence within the federal government. "As a

result, scientific experts have not been as involved in high-level policy discussions on crucial issues such as climate change, stem cell research and bioterrorism,” the report says.

As another case of the conflict between scientists and the administration, Gottfried pointed to assertions by Bush and high-level administration officials that prewar Iraq attempted to import aluminum tubes intended for a nuclear weapon program. That claim, used to bolster the White House’s case for war, was based on a CIA analysis but was disputed by experts from several U.S. nuclear laboratories (see [GSN](#), March 9, 2006). The scientists’ analysis, though, “didn’t coordinate with the policy,” Gottfried said.

The White House had not returned a request for comment as of press time. A State Department spokeswoman said she could not comment without first reading the report.

The organization issued a statement signed by prominent researchers, including Nobel laureates and former high-level federal scientists, calling for the next administration and for Congress not to meddle in scientific affairs.

Government scientists need to be free of interference when it comes to conducting their work, communicating and publishing their findings, blowing the whistle on abuses of science and undergoing peer reviews, the report says.

Gottfried expressed optimism about the likelihood of change, whether the occupant of the White House is a Democrat or Republican. It will take more than a change of presidents, he said. Federal scientists will have to regain the sense that they are free to speak freely — possibly through legislative protections.

Experts on arms control will only have influence if the next administration favors that work more strongly than seen in the Bush White House, Gottfried said.

“I’m hopeful,” he said. “What is the saying, hope springs eternal?”

emphasis added.

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