

Edited by John J. Miller

# Mad science

"The Republican War on Science,"  
by Chris Mooney  
Basic Books, \$24.95  
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I enjoy a spirited, well-argued political argument as much as anybody, but in "The Republican War on Science," journalist Chris Mooney offers only a tiresome polemic. It makes one think of a debater who is assigned to one side or the other of a proposition on the basis of a coin flip: If it lands on heads, he has to argue that the Republicans are the bad guys.

Mooney is relentless, but he isn't especially convincing. To be sure, some of the criticisms he levels at the Bush administration are justified, on matters such as litmus tests for appointees to science-related positions, distorted information to consumers about health and safety issues and antagonism toward embryonic stem-cell research. But Mooney's insistent denials that there have been equivalent misdeeds by the political left are wholly unconvincing.

There is no question that many of the Bush administration's science-related appointments leave much to be desired. Choosing Lester Crawford for the Food and Drug Administration, Julie Gerberding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Christine Todd Whitman for the Environmental Protection Agency and Elias Zerhouni for the National Institutes of Health were, to be charitable, uninspiring decisions. The inept Richard Carmona as surgeon general and bumbling Tommy Thompson as secretary of Health and Human services were inconceivable ones.

But Mooney, like many critics of the Bush administration's mistakes, seems to have experienced an overnight epiphany about the importance of defensible science policy — and this raises questions about his sincerity. Not one of these critics has censured the Clinton administration's blatant perversion of science. At one point, Mooney seems about to come clean: "Let's be fair: those on the political left have undoubtedly abused science in the past. While the best environmental groups marshal good science to make their case, more radical groups have occasionally allowed ideology to usurp fact." By which he means fringe kooks like Greenpeace and radical animal rights activists. But there's nary a hint that liberal politicians might be capable of distorting or manipulating science.

Mooney seems blissfully unaware that his diatribe repeatedly indulges in exactly the sort of sweeping, gratuitous condemnation of which he accuses others: "The conservative faith in industry and unrestrained capitalism seems to fuel a parallel assumption that industry-sponsored science — like the free market itself — stands above reproach." Just as, apparently, in the loony Mooney parallel universe, all things conservative and business-related are beneath contempt.

When political fortunes change and a new party comes to power in the executive branch, one must expect a change in the overall philoso-

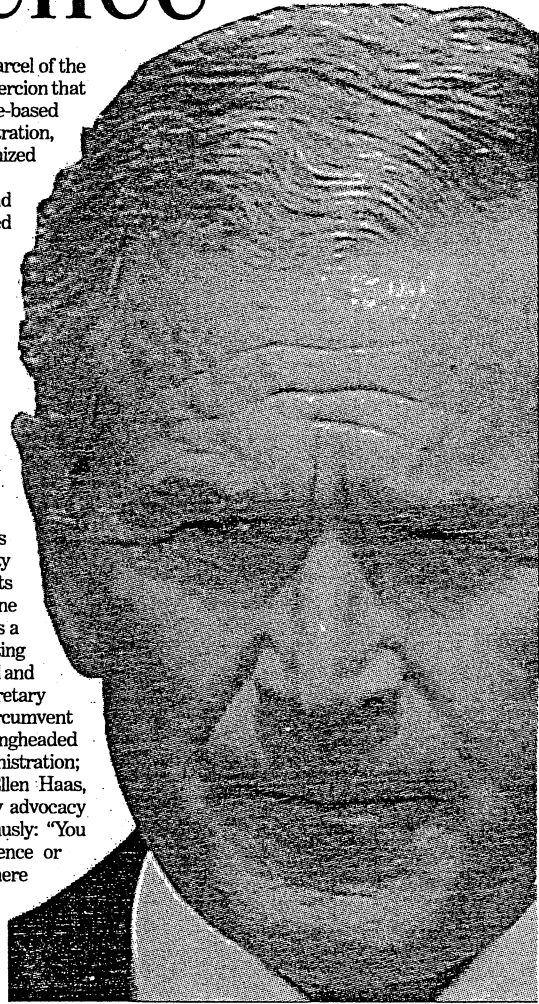
phy of government. This is part and parcel of the political process. The heavy-handed coercion that was imposed on governmental, science-based activities during the Clinton administration, however, was far outside the recognized rules of the game.

As President Clinton's science and technology czar, Al Gore was entrusted with choosing many top appointees to regulatory agencies, thereby obtaining the leverage to politicize the administration's policies and decisions. And what a collection of yes-men and anti-science, anti-technology ideologues they were: presidential science adviser Jack Gibbons, as incompetent and hapless as any incumbent who has ever occupied the critical post, whose primary qualification seemed to be mastery of the phrase, "Yes, Mr. Vice President"; EPA chief and Gore acolyte Carol Browner, whose agency was condemned by the scientific community and admonished by the courts for its flawed policies; FDA Commissioner Jane Henney, rewarded with the position as a political payoff for her earlier politicizing of the agency's critical oversight of food and drugs; State Department Undersecretary Tim Wirth, who worked tirelessly to circumvent Congress' refusal to ratify radical, wrongheaded treaties signed by the Clinton administration; and Agriculture Under Secretary Ellen Haas, former director of an anti-technology advocacy group, who reconstructed science thusly: "You can have 'your' science or 'my' science or 'somebody else's' science. By nature, there is going to be a difference."

Gore's 1992 magnum opus, "Earth in the Balance," provides a disturbing insight into the thinking of the man who came within a few hanging chads of becoming policymaker in chief. Throughout the book, Gore employs the metaphor that those who believe in technological advances are as sinister, and polluters are as evil, as the perpetrators of the Holocaust. He decries the separation of science and religion. He accuses Americans of being dysfunctional because we've developed "an apparent obsession with inauthentic substitutes for direct experience with real life," such as "Astroturf, air conditioning and fluorescent lights ... Walkman and Watchman, entertainment cocoons, frozen food for the microwave oven," and so on. (These words are especially ironic given that Gore's new cable-television channel, Current, is likely to provide inauthentic substitutes for direct experience with real entertainment, to coin a phrase.)

Inexplicably, Gore is virtually a no-show in Mooney's book. Never has American government been burdened with such politically motivated, anti-science, anti-business, anti-social eco-babble as during the Clinton-Gore years. Yet those who now criticize the Bush administration were silent when their voices were most needed.

Mooney is correct to say that "when scientific information becomes merely something to be manipulated to achieve a political end, the quality and integrity of the political process inevitably suffer." But there appears little likelihood that the science policies of any administration, whether Democrat or Republican, will become less politicized or more rational in the foreseeable future. For one thing, there is no important constituency



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for sound science policy. On the contrary, politicization often represents merely pandering to the fears, which sometimes verge on superstition, of a scientifically illiterate public.

Democrats and Republicans have learned to excel at the Emperor's New Clothes School of policy-making. They try to confer legitimacy on almost any policy, no matter how flawed or inimical to the public interest, by moving from step to bureaucratic step according to the rules, with everyone pretending the evolution and substance of the policy are plausible. There is an axiom that something said three times becomes a fact, and adherence to the procedural requirements of federal rule making is the apotheosis of that idea.

Cynicism about the motivations and actions of those in government is healthy. But for criticism to be credible, it should be consistent, even if not wholly apolitical. Mooney's attack on Republicans is nothing but raw and tedious partisanship.

As MIT meteorologist Richard Lindzen has sagely observed, science "provides our only way of separating what is true from what is asserted. If we abuse that tool, it will not be available when it is needed." The same might be said of science journalism. Nota bene, Chris Mooney.

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