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The Junk Science of George W. Bush

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As Jesuit schoolboys studying world history we learned that Copernicus and Galileo self-censored for many decades their proofs that the earth revolved around the sun and that a less restrained heliocentrist, Giordano Bruno, was burned alive in 1600 for the crime of sound science. With the encouragement of our professor, Father Joyce, we marveled at the capacity of human leaders to corrupt noble institutions. Lust for power had caused the Catholic hierarchy to subvert the church's most central purpose--the search for existential truths.

Today, flat-earthers within the Bush Administration--aided by right-wing allies who have produced assorted hired guns and conservative think tanks to further their goals--are engaged in a campaign to suppress science that is arguably unmatched in the Western world since the Inquisition. Sometimes, rather than suppress good science, they simply order up their own. Meanwhile, the Bush White House is purging, censoring and blacklisting scientists and engineers whose work threatens the profits of the Administration's corporate paymasters or challenges the ideological underpinnings of their radical anti-environmental agenda. Indeed, so extreme is this campaign that more than sixty scientists, including Nobel laureates and medical experts, released a statement on February 18 that accuses the Bush Administration of deliberately distorting scientific fact "for partisan political ends."

I've had my own experiences with Torquemada's modern successors, both personal and related to my work as an environmental lawyer and advocate working for the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Waterkeeper Alliance.

At the time of the World Trade Center catastrophe on September 11, 2001, I had just opened an office at

115 Broadway, cater-corner from the World Trade Center and within the official security zone to which access was, afterward, restricted for several months. Upon returning to the office in October my partner, Kevin Madonna, suffered a burning throat, nausea and a headache that was still pounding twenty-four hours after he left the building. Despite the Environmental Protection Agency's claims that air quality was safe, Kevin refused to return and we closed the office. Many workers did not have that option; their employers relied on the EPA's nine press releases between September and December of 2001 reassuring the public about the wholesome air quality downtown. We have since learned that the government was lying to us. An Inspector General's report released last August revealed that the EPA's data did not support those assurances and that its press releases were being drafted or doctored by White House officials intent on reopening Wall Street.

On September 13, just two days after the terror attack, the EPA announced that asbestos dust in the area was "very low" or entirely absent. On September 18 the agency said the air was "safe to breathe." In fact, more than 25 percent of the samples collected by the EPA before September 18 showed presence of asbestos above the 1 percent safety benchmark. Among outside studies, one performed by scientists at the University of California, Davis, found particulates at levels never before seen in more than 7,000 similar tests worldwide. A study being performed by Mt. Sinai School of Medicine has found that 78 percent of rescue workers suffered lung ailments and 88 percent had ear, nose and throat problems in the months following the attack and that about half still had persistent lung and respiratory illnesses nine months to a year later.

Dan Tishman, whose company was involved in the reconstruction at 140 West Street, required his crews to wear respirators but recalls seeing many rescue and construction workers laboring unprotected--no doubt relying on the government's assurances. "The frustrating thing is that everyone just counts on the EPA to be the watchdog of public health," he says. "When that role is compromised, people can get hurt."

I also recall the case of Dr. James Zahn, a nationally respected microbiologist with the Agriculture Department's research service, who accepted my invitation to speak to an April 2002 conference of more than 1,000 family farm advocates and environmental and civic leaders in Clear Lake, Iowa. In a rigorous taxpayer-funded study, Zahn had identified bacteria that can make people sick--and that are resistant to antibiotics--in the air surrounding industrial-style hog farms. His studies proved that billions of these "superbugs" were traveling across property lines daily, endangering the health of neighbors and their herds. I was shocked when Zahn canceled his appearance on the day of the conference under orders from the Agriculture Department in Washington. I later uncovered a fax trail proving the order was prompted by lobbyists from the National Pork Producers Council. Zahn told me that his supervisor at the USDA, under pressure from the hog industry, had ordered him not to publish his study and that he had been forced to cancel more than a dozen public appearances at local planning boards and county health commissions seeking information about health impacts of industry mega-farms. Soon after my conference, Zahn resigned from the government in disgust.

Ignoring Bad News

The Bush Administration's first instinct when it comes to science has been to suppress, discredit or alter facts it doesn't like. Probably the best-known case is global warming. Over the past two years the Administration has done this to a dozen major government studies on global warming, as well as to a report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its own efforts to stall action to control industrial emissions. The list also includes major long-term studies by the federal government's National Research Council and National Academy of Sciences, and by scientific teams at the EPA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA, and a 2002 collaborative report by scientists at all three of those agencies.

The Administration has taken special pains to shield Vice President Dick Cheney's old company, Halliburton, which is part of an industry that has contributed \$58 million to Republicans since 2000. Halliburton is the leading practitioner of a process used in extracting oil and gas known as hydraulic fracturing, in which benzene is injected into underground formations. EPA scientists studying the process in 2002 found that it could contaminate ground-water supplies in excess of federal drinking water standards. A week after reporting their findings to Congressional staff members, however, they revised the data to indicate that benzene levels would not exceed government standards. In a letter to Representative Henry Waxman, EPA officials said the change was made based on "industry feedback."

As a favor to utility and coal industries, America's largest mercury dischargers, the EPA sat for nine months on a report exposing the catastrophic impact on children's health of mercury, finally releasing it in February 2003. Among the findings of the report: The bloodstream of one in twelve US women is saturated with enough mercury to cause neurological damage, permanent IQ loss and a grim inventory of other diseases in their unborn children.

The list goes on. In October 2001 Interior Secretary Gale Norton, responding to a Senate committee inquiry on the effects of oil drilling on caribou in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, falsely claimed that the caribou would not be affected, because they calve outside the area targeted for drilling. She later explained that she somehow substituted "outside" for "inside." She also substituted findings from a study financed by an oil company for some of the ones that the Fish and Wildlife Service had prepared for her. In another case, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Norton and White House political adviser Karl Rove pressed for changes that would allow diversion of substantial amounts of water from the Klamath River to benefit local supporters and agribusiness contributors. Some 34,000 endangered salmon were killed after National Marine Fisheries scientists altered their findings on the amount of water the salmon required. Environmentalists describe it as the largest fish kill in the history of the West. Mike Kelly, the fisheries biologist on the Klamath who drafted the biological opinion, told me that under the current plan coho salmon are probably headed for extinction. According to Kelly, "The morale is very low among scientists here. We are under pressure to get the right results. This Administration is putting the species at risk for political gain. And not just in the Klamath."

Roger Kennedy, former director of the National Park Service, told me that the alteration and deletion of scientific information is now standard procedure at Interior. "It's hard to decide what is more demoralizing about the Administration's politicization of the scientific process," he said, "its disdain for

professional scientists working for our government or its willingness to deceive the American public."

Getting the Right Answer

But suppressing or altering science can be a tricky business; the Bush Administration has found it easier at times simply to arrange to get the results it wants. A case in point is the decision in July by the EPA's regional office overseeing the western Everglades to accept a study financed predominantly by developers, which concludes that wetlands discharge more pollutants than they absorb. There was no peer review or public comment. With its approval, the EPA is giving developers credit for improving water quality by replacing natural wetlands with golf courses and other developments.

The study was financed by the Water Enhancement and Restoration Committee, which was formed primarily by local developers and chaired by Rick Barber, the consultant for a golf course development for which the EPA had denied a permit because it would pollute surrounding waters and destroy wetlands. The study contradicts everything known about wetlands functioning, including a determination by more than twenty-five scientists and managers at the Tampa Bay Estuary Program that, on balance, wetlands do not generate nitrogen pollution. Bruce Boler, a biologist and water-quality specialist working for the EPA office, resigned in protest. Boler says the developers massaged the data to support their theory by evaluating samples collected near roads and bridges, where developments discharge pollutants. "It was like the politics trumped the science," he told us.

In a similar case, last November the EPA cut a private deal with a pesticide manufacturer to take over federal studies of a pesticide it manufactures. Atrazine is the most heavily utilized weedkiller in America. First approved in 1958, by the 1980s it had been identified as a potential carcinogen associated with high incidences of prostate cancer among workers at manufacturing facilities. Testing by the US Geological Survey regularly finds alarming concentrations of Atrazine in drinking water across the corn belt. Even worse, last year scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, found that Atrazine at one-thirtieth the government's "safe" 3 parts per billion level causes grotesque deformities in frogs, including multiple sets of organs. And this year epidemiologists from the University of Missouri found reproductive consequences in humans associated with Atrazine, including male semen counts in farm communities that are 50 percent below normal. Iowa scientists are finding similar results in a current study.

The Bush Administration reacted to the frightening findings not by banning this dangerous chemical, as the European Union has, but by taking the studies away from EPA scientists and, in an unprecedented move, giving the chemical's manufacturer, Switzerland-based Syngenta, control over federal research. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Sherry Ford, a spokesperson for Syngenta, praised without irony the advantages of having the company monitor its own product. "This is one way we can ensure it's not presenting any risk to the environment."

In a dramatic expansion of this disturbing strategy, the Bush Administration now plans to systematically turn government science over to private industry by contracting out thousands of science jobs to

compliant consultants already in the habit of massaging data to support corporate profits. The National Park Service is preparing a first phase of contracting reviews, involving about 1,800 positions, including biologists, archeologists and environmental specialists. Later phases may entail replacement of 11,000 employees, more than two-thirds of the service's permanent work force.

At least federal employees enjoy civil service and whistleblower protection intended to allow them to operate professionally and independently. Private contractors don't enjoy the same level of protection. "You can shop for the right contractor to give you the kind of result you want," says Frank Buono, a retired Park Service veteran who now serves on the board of a nonprofit whistleblower protection organization.

As a Last Resort, Fire the Messenger

Most federal employees have gone along with the Bush Administration's wishes, but a few have tried to stand up for sound science. The results are predictable. When a team of government biologists indicated that the Army Corps of Engineers was violating the Endangered Species Act in managing the flow of the Missouri River, the group was quickly replaced by an industry-friendly panel. (In an unexpected--and fortunate--development, the new panel ultimately declined to adopt the White House's pro-barge-industry position and upheld the decision to manage the river to protect imperiled species.) Similarly, last April the EPA suddenly dismantled an advisory panel that had spent nearly twenty-one months developing rules for stringent regulation of industrial emissions of mercury [see Alterman and Green, page 14].

Or consider the case of Tony Oppgard and Jack Spadaro, members of a team of federal geodesic engineers selected to investigate the collapse of barriers that held back a coal slurry pond in Kentucky containing toxic wastes from mountaintop strip-mining. The 300-million-gallon spill was the largest in American history and, according to the EPA, the greatest environmental catastrophe in the history of the Eastern United States. Black lava-like toxic sludge containing sixty poisonous chemicals choked and sterilized up to 100 miles of rivers and creeks and poisoned the drinking water in seventeen communities. Unlike in other slurry disasters, no one died, but hundreds of residents were sickened by contact with contaminated water.

The investigation had broad implications for the viability of mountaintop mining, which involves literally lopping off mountaintops to get access to the underlying coal. It is a process beloved by coal barons because it practically dispenses with the need for human labor and thus increases industry profits. Spadaro, the nation's leading expert on slurry spills, recalls, "We were geotechnical engineers determined to find the truth. We simply wanted to get to the heart of the matter--find out what happened and why, and to prevent it from happening again. But all that was thwarted at the top of the agency by Bush appointees who obstructed professionals trying to do their jobs."

The Bush Administration appointees all had coal industry pedigrees. Labor Secretary Elaine Chao (the wife of Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, the Senate's biggest recipient of industry largesse)

appointed Dave Lauriski, a former executive with Energy West Mining, as the new director of the Mine Safety and Health Administration, which oversaw the investigation. His deputy assistant secretary was John Caylor, an Anamax Mining alumnus. His other deputy assistant, John Correll, had worked for both Amax and Peabody Coal.

Oppegard, the leader of the federal team, was fired on the day Bush was inaugurated in 2001. All eight members of the team except Spadaro signed off on a whitewashed investigation report. Spadaro, like the others, was harassed but flat-out refused to sign. In April of 2001 Spadaro resigned from the team and filed a complaint with the Inspector General of the Labor Department. Last June 4 he was placed on administrative leave--a prelude to getting fired.

Bush Administration officials accuse Spadaro of "abusing his authority" for allowing a handicapped instructor to have free room and board at a training academy he oversees, an arrangement approved by his superiors. An internal report vindicated Spadaro's criticisms of the investigation, but the Administration is still going after his job. "I've been regulating mining since 1966," Spadaro told me. "This is the most lawless administration I've encountered. They have no regard for protecting miners or the people in mining communities. They are without scruples."

Science, like theology, reveals transcendent truths about a changing world. At their best, scientists are moral individuals whose business is to seek the truth. Over the past two decades industry and conservative think tanks have invested millions of dollars to corrupt science. They distort the truth about tobacco, pesticides, ozone depletion, dioxin, acid rain and global warming. In their attempt to undermine the credible basis for public action (by positing that all opinions are politically driven and therefore any one is as true as any other), they also undermine belief in the integrity of the scientific process.

Now Congress and this White House have used federal power for the same purpose. Led by the President, the Republicans have gutted scientific research budgets and politicized science within the federal agencies. The very leaders who so often condemn the trend toward moral relativism are fostering and encouraging the trend toward scientific relativism. The very ideologues who derided Bill Clinton as a liar have now institutionalized dishonesty and made it the reigning culture of America's federal agencies.

The Bush Administration has so violated and corrupted the institutional culture of government agencies charged with scientific research that it could take a generation for them to recover their integrity even if Bush is defeated this fall. Says Princeton University scientist Michael Oppenheimer, "If you believe in a rational universe, in enlightenment, in knowledge and in a search for the truth, this White House is an absolute disaster."