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Obama Puts His Own Spin on Mix of Science With Politics

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#)

WASHINGTON — [President Obama](#)'s directive on Monday to "guarantee scientific integrity" in federal policy making could have a far-reaching impact, affecting issues as varied as [climate change](#), national security, protection of endangered species and children's health.

But it will not divorce science from politics, or strip ideology from presidential decisions.

Mr. Obama delighted many scientists and patients by formally announcing that he was overturning the Bush administration's limits on embryonic [stem cell](#) research. But the president also went one step further, issuing a memorandum that sets forth broad parameters for how his administration would choose expert advisers and use scientific data.

The document orders Mr. Obama's top science adviser to help draft guidelines that will apply to every federal agency. Agencies will be expected to pick science advisers based on expertise, not political ideology, the memorandum said, and will offer whistle-blower protections to employees who expose the misuse or suppression of scientific information.

The idea, the president said in remarks before an audience of lawmakers, scientists, patients advocates and patients in the East Room, is to ensure that "we make scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology": a line that drew more applause than any other. Irv Weissman, who directs an institute at [Stanford University](#) devoted to studying stem cells, called the declaration "of even greater importance" than the stem cell announcement itself.

It was also another in a long string of rebukes by Mr. Obama toward his predecessor, President [George W. Bush](#). Mr. Bush was often accused of trying to shade or even suppress the findings of government scientists on climate change, sex education, contraceptives and other issues, as well as stem cells. But Mr. Obama's announcement does not elevate science to some new and exalted place in his administration.

"Scientists should have no illusions about whether they make policy — they don't," said Harold Varmus, president of the [Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center](#) and co-chairman of a panel that advises Mr. Obama on science matters.

The directive, Dr. Varmus said, was simply intended "to provide the best available scientific information" to those who make policy decisions.

Scientists said they were thrilled by the announcement, as were advocates for patients, including [Nancy Reagan](#), the former first lady who has made embryonic stem cell research a personal cause.

Mr. Obama said in his Inaugural Address that he intended to “restore science to its rightful place,” and researchers said he had already made good on that promise by naming Nobel laureates like Dr. Varmus and [Steven Chu](#), the energy secretary, to advise him.

“We’re not dumb — we know that policy is made on the basis of facts and values,” said Alan I. Leshner, chief executive of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a former director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse under President [Bill Clinton](#) and, briefly, Mr. Bush.

But by asserting “the centrality of science to every issue of modern life,” Dr. Leshner said, Mr. Obama is suggesting that science rather than ideology will be the foundation for his decision making. “What you are seeing now is both a response to the last eight years, and a genuine reaction to President Obama’s enthusiasm for science,” he said.

During the Bush years, Congressional Democrats and scientists themselves issued report after report asserting that the White House had distorted or suppressed scientific information: including efforts to strip information about condoms from a government Web site and the editing of air quality reports issued by the [Environmental Protection Agency](#).

The [Union of Concerned Scientists](#), for example, maintains an “A to Z” list on its Web site of “case studies” in what it calls the politicization of science under Mr. Bush, like his decision to devote federal money to programs promoting abstinence education despite studies showing that such programs have limited effectiveness.

The House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform spent 16 months examining the Bush administration’s use of scientific data on climate change; it issued a lengthy report in 2007 documenting “a systematic White House effort to censor climate scientists by controlling their access to the press and editing testimony to Congress.” Representative [Henry A. Waxman](#), Democrat of California, who led the committee at the time, said Monday that Mr. Bush had “exhibited a willingness to undermine science in order to further a conservative agenda.”

But Mr. Bush’s defenders see Mr. Obama as just imposing an ideology of his own. They say Mr. Bush did not ignore scientific facts; rather, he took the counsel of scientists and used it to make a policy determination that reflected his values, just as Mr. Obama is doing in lifting Mr. Bush’s restrictions on stem cell research.

“Those who suggest that the Bush administration did not rigorously apply science are themselves ignoring the facts,” said [Karl Rove](#), the former president’s political strategist.

Mr. Rove called Mr. Obama’s declaration on restoring scientific integrity “simply hyperbole and hyperventilation,” and he disputed Mr. Waxman’s accusation on climate change, saying the Bush White House “put more money into global climate research than any administration in history, by a significant factor.”

In the end, said Ed Gillespie, the former counselor to Mr. Bush, all administrations use science in service of a political agenda.

“Administrations come into office with a point of view,” Mr. Gillespie said. “The people in office tend to

highlight those facts that support their point of view — not because they’re quashing dissent or not being scientific, but because this is what helps inform their thinking. A lot of scientific data can’t be refuted, but a lot of science is subjective. And even irrefutable science can be value-laden.”

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