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Obama Campaign Reveals Science Advisors

By Brandon Keim  September 17, 2008 | 7:53:47 PM Categories: [2008 Presidential Election](#)



Barack Obama has established a small but well-regarded inner circle of science advisors that includes a vocal critic of creationism, a Nobel laureate who has championed open-access research, and another laureate who used his prize money to defend academic freedom against the war on terror. Though their influence on the policies of a prospective Obama administration are unknown, they've played a prominent role in establishing his science platform to date.

Obama announced his [science platform](#) earlier this month in response to questions posed by ScienceDebate2008, a nonpartisan political education group. In response to a Wired Science follow-up, the campaign identified five people who helped draft Obama's statement: Harold Varmus, a Nobel laureate and former head of the National Institutes of Health; Gilbert Ommen, a former president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; Peter Agre, a Nobel laureate and ardent critic of the Bush administration; NASA researcher Donald Lamb; and Stanford University plant biologist Sharon Long.

Republican candidate John McCain [responded](#) to the ScienceDebate2008 [questions](#) on Monday, but his campaign ignored multiple requests for the identity of its science advisors.

On paper, both candidates have outlined a generally strong approach to science. There are [differences](#) -- Obama emphasizes basic-research funding and proposes moderately more ambitious greenhouse-gas cuts, while McCain supports a new wave of nuclear power and would [outlaw](#) some embryonic stem cell research -- but they are generally small. And at this pre-presidential moment, neither platform may provide more than a hazy indication of what each man would do as president.

Non-binding campaign rhetoric may be less important than the advisors they assemble when you're trying to divine the realities of each candidate's presidency.

"Neither of the candidates is a scientist to start with," said Thomas Murray, president of the Hastings Center, a nonpartisan bioethics think tank. "We can presume that they're going to rely on experts in science and science policy. It is important to know who their advisors are."

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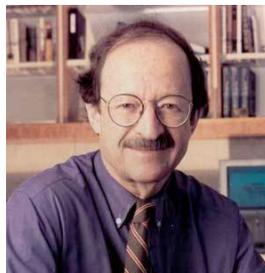
In some ways, Obama's team is a mix of contrasting approaches: Lamb and Agre are both academics, while Omenn is a director of the biotechnology company Amgen and Long was a director at agricultural giant Monsanto. In other ways, their expertise is narrow: four of the five advisors come from the life sciences.

"There are a lot of excellent scientists in major fields that we're going to need research in," said Martin Apple, president of the Council of Science Society Presidents, a confederation of scientific societies whose membership spans more than one million scientists and teachers. "The inner circle would be much improved by increasing the range of disciplines."

Apple was confident that Obama would be able to assemble such a team. "He's certainly the kind of person who tends to build larger consultation groups," he said. "All of [the advisors] have networks of people who would be able to put high-quality appointments together."

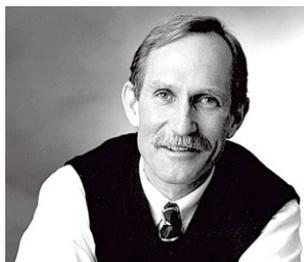
The Team:

Harold Varmus: President of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. He won a [Nobel Prize](#) in 1989 for breakthroughs in cancer genetics. Under Clinton, he directed the National Institutes of Health; the agency's budget doubled, but his legacy was tainted by his permitting NIH researchers to take [excessive payments](#) from pharmaceutical companies. A champion of open-access research, Varmus [co-founded](#) the *Public Library of Science*. He chairs the scientific board of [Grand Challenges in Global Health](#), launched by the Gates Foundation and NIH to improve health in the developing world. Varmus was an advisor to the now-defunct [Campaign to Defend the Constitution](#), launched to combat the political influence of the religious right. His [political contributions](#) and a list of [industry ties](#) are available.



Gilbert Omenn: Professor of internal medicine, human genetics and public health at the [University of Michigan](#). Former [president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science](#); during his tenure he [denounced anti-evolution education laws](#), and has been a vocal critic of creationism. "The logic that convinces us that evolution is a fact is the same logic we use to say smoking is hazardous to your health or we have serious energy policy issues because of global warming," he [told reporters](#) this year. "I would worry that a president who didn't believe in the evolution arguments wouldn't believe in those other arguments either. This is a way of leading our country to ruin." Omenn is a [director](#) of Amgen, a biotechnology company, and served in the Office of Science and Technology Policy under President Carter. His [campaign contributions](#) and a list of [industry ties](#) are available.

Peter Agre: Director of the [Johns Hopkins Malaria Research Institute](#). After winning a [Nobel Prize](#) in 2003 for discovering proteins that move water through cell membranes, he pledged to use the prize money to [defend scientific freedom](#) from the restrictions of the war on terror. He has been sharply critical of President Bush's climate change policies. "The Bush administration has been a disaster for the environment," he [said](#) in 2004. "If we wait until there's unequivocal proof that this is the cause of global climate change, it will be too late." Agre helped found [Scientists and Engineers for America](#), a non-partisan science advocacy group. An advocate of increased government investment in science, he wants more scientists to run for public office. He has appeared twice on [The Colbert Report](#).



Don Lamb: A University of Chicago [astrophysicist](#) and expert in stellar evolution, Lamb helped found the [Sloan Digital Sky Survey](#), which has been described as "the most ambitious astronomical survey ever undertaken," and recorded the most [distant explosion ever](#). A Mission Scientist on NASA's [High-Energy Transient Explorer](#), he has fought to maintain NASA's research budget. "Science at NASA is disappearing — fast," he told the *New York Times* in 2006. Lamb has also argued [against the privatization of commercial space flight](#). "Space exploration," he told the *Times*, "particularly manned space exploration, is just too expensive and risky to attract private enterprise, especially venture capitalists."



Sharon Long: Recently stepped down as dean of Stanford University's School of Humanities & Science to return to her [research](#) on the symbiosis of soil bacteria with [alfalfa](#). Long resigned last year from the Board of Directors of [Monsanto](#), an agricultural biotechnology corporation. A former [MacArthur Fellow](#), Long is a member of the [leadership council](#) of the National Academy of Sciences. She has [contributed](#) to the campaigns of both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.



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