The disapproval many in the scientific community feel regarding President Bush’s first year in office was captured in a December Science magazine article entitled “Breakdowns of 2001.” The writer noted that well into President Bush’s first year in office, many top science policy positions remained unfilled. A cartoon accompanying the article showed Bush sitting at the head of a conference table lined with empty chairs. Since Science is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the largest scientific society in Washington, D.C., its withering judgement can be considered a reflection of a view that is widely held within the scientific community.

The Science article referred specifically to the 10 months it took the Bush Administration to select John Marburger as White House science advisor. Marburger is also director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). Science could have added that it had taken Bush 12 months to name the members of the President’s Committee of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), which is co-chaired by Marburger and Floyd Kvamme, a partner in a Silicon Valley venture capital company called Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Byers (Menlo Park, California).

Despite the political successes of his first year and his sky-high public approval ratings, Bush is distrusted by some in the scientific community, in part because of what scientists perceive as his tepid support for the federal science agencies and his lack of technological savvy, certainly when compared to at least one member of the previous administration, Vice President Al Gore, Jr.

Bush’s decision not to give Marburger the title of assistant to the president, a title given to his Clinton administration predecessors, fanned the fire. Relocation of the entire OSTP staff outside the White House complex [although Marburger apparently has an office in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building (EEOB), next to the White House] did not help matters at all. Says Neal Lane, the second and last OSTP director under Clinton, “It is true, of course, that having the OSTP office located outside the White House grounds will make it more difficult, particularly for OSTP staff, to interact with other White House offices.”

David Goldston, chief of staff at the House Science Committee, thinks there were probably good explanations for both decisions. Withholding the “assistant to the president” title narrowed the kinds of executive branch lawsuits Marburger would be subject to, Goldston says. And he says a number of offices besides the OSTP’s were moved out of the EEOB because of security concerns. Goldston, whose boss is Rep. Sherwood Boehlert (R-New York), says “purely political reasons” account for the rumblings about Marburger.

It isn’t that Marburger was the wrong guy for the job. He is amply qualified. He came to the White House from the Department of Energy’s Brookhaven National Laboratory, where he was the director. Holder of a Ph.D. in applied physics from Stanford, he has taught at the University of Southern California and at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Neal Lane gives Marburger high marks. “He has all the experience, personal skills, knowledge, and accomplishments to do an outstanding job,” says Lane.

But others have criticized Marburger for appointing Richard Russell as associate director of technology. Russell is a former staffer on the House Science Committee and holds a Bachelor’s degree in biology. In an interview with The American Prospect magazine, John Holdren, director of the program on science, technology and public policy at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, called Russell’s appointment “just ridiculous.” Holdren added, “I find it inexplicable that we have a nominee who has no qualifications in technology whatsoever. None. Zero. Zip.”

Attempts to reach Russell for comment were unsuccessful. The White House press office did not respond to requests for an interview with him.

Bush’s appointment of Sean O’Keefe as NASA administrator also struck some science partisans the wrong way. O’Keefe had previously been confirmed by the Senate to serve as deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). His claim to fame was as a numbers cruncher. When House Science Committee Chairman Boehlert introduced O’Keefe to the
Senate Commerce Committee in December at O’Keefe’s NASA confirmation hearings, Boehlert acknowledged, “I have not been impressed by the criticism of Sean—sometimes offered sotto voce—that Sean is ‘a budgeteer not a rocketeer.’ Sean is not going to NASA to personally design rockets. But he knows enough about rockets to know that they burn cash just as assuredly as they burn fuel, and that both propellants are finite. It won’t hurt NASA to have someone who can husband the agency’s resources.”

Aside from questions about high-level science political appointees, Bush’s first budget proposals for the federal science agencies also rankled some. In February 2001, Bush asked for a 1.4% increase for the National Science Foundation. Not only was the 1.4% less than the average 4% increase set aside for most domestic spending programs, it paled beside the 14% increase the NSF had received the prior year. That fiscal 2001 increase was the biggest the NSF had ever received in its 50 years of existence. (Congress ultimately increased the NSF budget 8.4% for fiscal 2002.)

Recently, though, the Bush Administration has seemed to come around to the value of the NSF, according to Kei Koizumi, director of research and development budget policy at the AAAS. He points out that Mitch Daniels, the White House budget chief, praised the NSF during a speech to the National Press Club on November 28, 2001. Daniels pointed to the NSF as “another of the... true centers of excellence in this government.” He then added, “Programs like this... deserve to be singled out, deserve to be fortified and strengthened.” There has been talk that the White House, in its fiscal 2003 budget proposal due this winter, will propose transferring into the NSF some research programs now based at the Smithsonian Institution.

With the federal budget deficit projected to top $100 billion in fiscal 2003 and big increases slated for homeland defense, even Congress will be hard pressed to bump up what will likely be the parsimonious increases proposed by President Bush for the federal science agencies. But science policy initiatives are cropping up. Already in January, Marburger announced the establishment of an interagency working group under the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) to develop a comprehensive vision for air transportation. Marburger is also playing a key role in the Bush Administration’s deliberations on whether to restrict distribution of government documents that describe how to fabricate germ weapons. With Marburger, O’Keefe and others firmly on board, at least the seats around the White House science policy conference table are filling up with bodies.

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