

# Don't Politicize Science (Unless You're on My Side)

Reviewed by Jonathan H. Adler

## THE REPUBLICAN WAR ON SCIENCE

Revised and Updated, by Chris Mooney  
357 pp; New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 2006

It is hard to explain what George Deutsch was doing at the public affairs office of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. A political appointee in the Bush administration with no meaningful scientific background (let alone a college degree), Deutsch thought it would be a good idea to edit NASA's website so as to protect religious sensibilities. He had the Big Bang labeled a "theory" because, in his view, "it is opinion." "It is not NASA's place, nor should it be to make a declaration such as this about the existence of the universe that discounts intelligent design by a creator," Deutsch explained in a memo. At the same time, Deutsch limited press contact with NASA scientists, including noted climatologist James Hansen, who might offer opinions at odds with administration policy on issues like global warming.

Deutsch's appointment, and subsequent resignation, would seem to confirm the thesis of Chris Mooney's *The Republican War on Science*. After all, here was a young and underqualified political appointee, controlling public pronouncements from a scientific agency as if he were some sort of ideological commissar. How could Deutsch have obtained and maintained his position were the Bush administration concerned about open inquiry and scientific integrity in government agencies?

**POLITICAL SCIENCE ABUSE** As Mooney documents in his book, recent-

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ly updated and expanded in a paperback edition, the Deutsch affair is not an isolated example. Rather, it is but one episode of "political science abuse" to emerge over the past six years that President Bush has been in office — abuse that presents a "palpably real" threat to the republic.

"Political science abuse," defined by Mooney, is "any attempt to inappropriately undermine, alter, or otherwise interfere with the scientific process, or scientific conclusions, for political or ideological reasons." Examples include interference with scientific studies or the work of individual scientists, the deliberate slanting, misrepresentation, or suppression, of scientific findings, including the exaggeration of uncertainty, or otherwise seeking to skew scientific conclusions for political gain.

Such politicized science is not new, Mooney notes. "But it has recently reached crisis levels in the United States as the modern conservative movement — and the administration of George W. Bush — has shown a systematic willingness to misrepresent or even concoct its own 'science' to skew debates of fundamental consequence to the nation." Mooney further argues that this trend "threatens not just our public health and the environment, but the very integrity of American democracy, which relies heavily on scientific and technical expertise to function." The Bush administration has gone so far as to "push the issue of science politicization to the point of crisis."

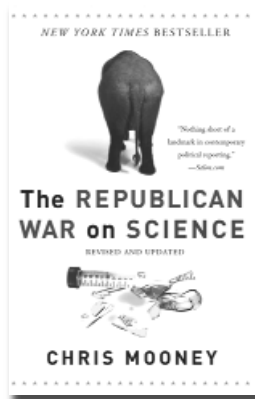
Mooney argues that the Republican Party's anti-science posture is born of its reliance upon the Christian Right and polluting industries, each of which seeks to suppress scientific information that

undermines its policy goals. Mooney blames "a convergence of multiple trends that have all triggered increasing science politicization: The rise of conservative think tanks; dogged attempts by industry groups to find new means of battling over the scientific basis of regulations, rather than regulations themselves; and a growing tendency among religious conservatives to find a 'scientific' argument on each moral question of interest to them." As a result, the "modern Right" is in "stark conflict with both scientific information and dispassionate, expert analysis in general."

Mooney is on strongest ground when he criticizes those conservatives who have embraced "intelligent design" and other religiously motivated, non-scientific claims. Insofar as Republicans have sought electoral advantage by endorsing or tolerating such claims, they deserve all the criticism Mooney dishes out, and then some.

But many of his other charges are overwrought, if not misleading. For instance, Mooney claims the Bush administration's decision to limit federal funding of stem cell research to preexisting embryonic cell lines "dramatically constricted the potential of research." Whatever the merits of the Bush administration policy, Mooney should have acknowledged that it *loosened* preexisting limits on stem cell research. More importantly, Mooney should have acknowledged that the debate over stem-cell research is ultimately not about science at all, but about the moral status of embryos and the propriety of government-funded research that could lead to their destruction. Mooney simply strains credulity when he suggests that the number of cell lines, rather than ideological opposition to the destruction of embryos, drove Bush policy, and conveniently ignores that both sides of this debate have sought to spin scientific findings to support the morality of their position.

While well-written and often per-



suasive, Mooney's *Republican War* has three central flaws: First, Mooney has a penchant for characterizing some legitimate science-related policy positions with which he disagrees as "abuses" of science. Second, he exhibits a blind spot to the misuse and politicization of science by those who espouse political agendas with which he agrees. Third and most important, Mooney pays little attention to the larger institutional context that generates political pressures on science. Without consideration of this broader institutional context, *Republican War* ultimately fails in its diagnosis and prescriptions.

**SOUND SCIENCE** Mooney's underlying argument is that science is necessary to inform, not dictate, many policy decisions. Political officials should not distort scientific findings or pressure scientists to reach convenient conclusions, nor should scientists pretend that their scientific conclusions inexorably lead to particular policy conclusions. Science can help to illuminate the nature of given problems, identify the likely trade-offs, and quantify the likely success of given technical solutions, but it does not dictate a given policy choice.

Mooney clearly understands this — or, at least, writes the words (e.g., "science should inform, but not dictate, political choices") — but he nonetheless departs from this perspective in the course of his analysis. Proclaiming his book "takes no position on questions of pure policy," Mooney time and again cannot help himself but to cast his lot with one side (and not the other) in heated policy debates to suggest that given scientific conclusions necessarily support particular sorts of policy responses. "Bad scientific information leads, inexorably, to bad policy," he writes. To be sure, better information should lead to more informed decisions. Yet Mooney often suggests something more — that fealty to scientific principles will lead to policy conclusions that he shares.

A good example is Mooney's discussion of industry efforts to ensure greater use of "sound science" in policymaking. "To the Right, 'sound science' means

requiring a higher burden of proof before action can be taken to protect public health and the environment," Mooney explains. This is true enough, insofar as such claims betray an underlying policy preference for avoiding the adoption of costly regulatory controls absent reliable evidence that they are necessary. But this is no less (or more) scientific than the alternative of encouraging "precautionary" regulation to control hypothetical risks before they are demonstrated to be real.

Likewise, Mooney's criticisms of the Data Quality Act are anything but scientific. He complains that the act "shifts the regulatory playing field still further in industry's favor" because it makes it more difficult to adopt regulatory con-

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trols. Again, this is not a scientific critique but a policy objection. Ditto Mooney's concerns about proposed amendments to the Endangered Species Act that would require greater amounts of scientific evidence before a species can be listed as "endangered."

Mooney complains that "time and resource constraints — as well as the difficulties of conducting science at the edges of what is known or with the goal of projecting possible future risks" means that much policy-oriented scientific research does not meet traditional standards of peer review. Whether such science should be relied upon in the regulatory process is an inherently political judgment, however. It may well be that such a policy will "further ossify an already sluggish regulatory process" and "hamper" the ability of regulatory agencies to adopt new "science-based" restrictions on private economic activity. Whether this is good or bad policy reflects a normative claim about what level of evidence is sufficient to justify government regulation of private affairs. It is anything but a claim about science, and Mooney undermines his case when he suggests otherwise.

**LONGSTANDING GAME** While politicization of science is rampant in the nation's capital and throughout political institutions, Mooney also fails to substantiate his central claim that a given ideological orientation or political party is to blame for the assault on science and that a partisan electoral strategy is the lifeline that will save science from a horrendous fate.

Mooney accuses the Bush administration of "flagrant . . . scientific deceptions" and "unprecedented distortions of scientific information." Without question, the Bush administration has often been guilty of such acts. Yet many of the specific charges — politically motivated personnel decisions, stacking advisory committees, and selective editing of government reports — can be made against any recent administration of either party. Such a "willingness to torque analyses to make them seem supportive of preexisting policy preferences" is old hat in Washington, D.C. This is not

to justify such abuses — for abuses they are — but Mooney cannot be so naïve as to think that Republicans, or the Bush administration in particular, invented or even perfected such techniques. They are merely the most recent practitioners of a longstanding game.

On what basis does Mooney assure the reader that the Bush administration's actions are worse than others? Well, former Clinton administration officials and progressive activist groups say so. Mooney purports to assess instances of alleged scientific politicization in prior administrations, but largely ignores the most serious charges of science politicization against Democratic administrations. Certainly such offenses are less recent, but that does not stop Mooney's attacks on the Reagan administration. Indeed, he notes the "striking similar charges" of scientific advisory committee manipulation in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations, but gives little attention to similar claims made against President Clinton. He accuses the Reagan administration of "flagrantly exploit[ing] scientific uncertainty" on the effects of acid rain, yet makes no reference to the conclusions of the National Acid Precipitation Assess-

ment Program, the comprehensive scientific evaluation that vindicated some of the Reagan administration's claims.

Mooney's thesis is not simply that Republicans politicize science, for surely they do, but that the Right is far worse than the Left; "in politicized fights involving science, it is rare to find liberals entirely innocent of abuses. But they are *almost never* as guilty as the Right" (emphasis added). Taking the discussion out of a purely partisan context, Mooney acknowledges "those on the political left have undoubtedly abused science in the past," and "occasionally allowed ideology to usurp fact," as with the environmental movement's fear-mongering campaigns against agricultural biotechnology. But such instances are rare, Mooney assures us, and have had less political effect than those of the Right. Yet there are many examples of regulatory measures based upon faulty scientific premises. For instance, while the scientific consensus rejects the notion that genetically modified food products pose any distinct threats, the regulatory process assumes otherwise. To sustain his charge, Mooney needs to do more than show Republicans have committed abuses in recent years when Republicans had the power to do so. He needs to show that one side of the aisle wields its power to abuse science in a qualitatively worse way, and he fails to do so.

**IDEOLOGICAL BLINDERS** Mooney rarely questions those groups or constituencies with which he tends to agree. His critical analysis of scientific studies is highly selective. He rightly criticizes anti-abortion activists for alleging a connection between abortions and breast cancer, yet he uncritically accepts other dubious scientific claims when they support his policy preferences. In contrast to the GOP, which relies upon business lobbyists and the Religious Right, he suggests the Democratic Party has "pro-science" constituencies, such as an environmental movement that "draws regularly on science to demonstrate the harms of various forms of environmental degradation and to demand stronger government regulation." Mooney provides only minimal discussion of the environmental movement's history of

exaggerated environmental claims, however, many of which have driven government policy. He argues that "science has become the battlefield of choice for conservatives seeking to block environmental protections," but ignores that it is also the chosen battlefield of many environmental organizations that claim scientific studies require additional government intervention.

Mooney correctly observes that "where religious conservatives may once have advanced their pro-life and socially traditionalist views through moral arguments, they now increasingly adopt the veneer of scientific and technical expertise." Yet the same can be said of many other interest groups that seek to influence policy decisions that are, or at least can be, informed by scientific research. Contending players in policy disputes seek to play scientific authority as a trump card, cutting off debate, as if the resolution of normative policy debates could be resolved by an appeal to "objective" science. Mooney knows this is no way to make policy — indeed he says as much, observing that "claiming scientific justification for a purely political move undermines science by treating it as a source of post hoc justification, rather than a valuable input into the decision-making process." Controlling science thus becomes a way to dictate policy. Yet Mooney seems blind to the extent to which such scientific appeals pervade policy discourse.

Mooney also rightly criticizes some industry groups for their ad hominem attacks against scientists with whom they disagree. Nonetheless, Mooney falls prey to the same temptation. He acknowledges, "As a general rule, we should never consider the funding source of a study as prima facie evidence either of its validity or otherwise," yet cannot help but note when a scientist he wants to discredit received funding from a corporate source, however minor or indirect. Thus he impugns the work of University of Delaware climatologist David Legates because he was listed as an "adjunct scholar" with a think tank that once received \$75,000 from ExxonMobil. Such "industry ties," Mooney suggests, are reasons to question Legates' and others' views on global climate change. Mooney knows

that the validity of scientific research should be evaluated independently of its funding source, but he seems to forget it when convenient to score opponents.

Illustrating his own ideological blinders, Mooney fails to identify similar connections when citing scientists who take positions more to his liking. Mooney relies extensively on a Union of Concerned Scientists attack on President Bush's policies, dismissing the group's own checkered past of subordinating science to its progressive policy agenda with a sentence noting that a few moderate Republicans endorsed the group's report.

**PUBLIC SCIENCE?** That prior administrations or one side of a given policy debate distorted or suppressed scientific findings for political advantage, manipulated technical data, or sanctioned government scientists with whom it disagreed does not excuse equivalent actions by the Bush administration. But the prevalence of such acts across the ideological spectrum should lead one to consider the larger institutional pressures that are inexorably brought to bear on science within the political process. "The dramatic triumph of science itself has inadvertently created strong incentives for politicization and abuse," notes Mooney, without taking the next step to consider how this has been institutionalized. It is here that Mooney's analysis is most deficient, as he makes no effort to comprehend how such pressures arise, and what may be done to control them. This book would have benefited immensely if Mooney had even a passing familiarity with public choice.

Well attuned to the potential influence of private economic interests on the presentation of scientific research, Mooney seems oblivious to the effect of pervasive government research funding on the nature and presentation of scientific research. He worries about "the conservative movement's curious preference for private-sector scientific research over 'public science,'" as if government funding somehow immunizes scientists from the incentives created by their own self-interest. Apparently, scientists will tailor their research to attract private funding, but government researchers could never respond in an equivalent fashion to



secure grants or influence policy.

Existing institutions and legal structures create hydraulic pressure to politicize science for political ends. Under many statutes, particular scientific findings automatically trigger given nondiscretionary regulatory responses. Under the Endangered Species Act, for example, the discovery of endangered species habitat can bar certain activities on federal land, even if other measures would be more effective at conserving the species. Such provisions, which exist in numerous environmental laws, create a tremendous incentive to influence scientific research and dictate outcomes, as the science is the primary determinant of the resulting policies.

**SCRUTINIZE AND EDUCATE** Because his analysis is deficient, his recommendations for saving science from politicization fall flat. While purporting to eschew an explicitly partisan agenda, Mooney counsels: “if we care about science and believe that it should play a crucial role in decisions about our future, we must steadfastly oppose further political gains by the modern Right,” which has “ceded any right to govern a technologically advanced and sophisticated nation.” “Our future relies on our intelligence, but today’s Right — failing to grasp this fact in virtually every political situation in which it really matters, and nourishing disturbing anti-intellectual tendencies — cannot deliver us there successfully or safely. If it will not come to its senses, we must cast it aside.” (Now that climate change skeptic John Dingell is again chairing the House Commerce Committee, one wonders whether Mooney is having second thoughts.)

Beyond electing Democrats and opposing the “antiscience right wing of the Republican Party,” his recommendations are scarcely more than platitudes about the need for good government and sound policy processes. He stresses that “scientific theories and interpretations survive or perish based on the process of peer review, by which scientific claims are carefully scrutinized.” He thus urges journalists to be deeply skeptical of “fringe” or insufficiently substantiated claims, yet remains aghast that Congress might insist on some form of peer review

before scientific studies serve as the basis for regulations controlling private conduct and affecting millions of dollars of private resources.

Scientists must become more involved in policy debates, he recommends, but not simply (or even primarily) to advocate specific policy proposals. Rather, they should help educate policymakers and the public about the power and limitations of science to inform the policymaking process. He endorses “new institutions and new laws to safeguard the role of science in policymaking,” such as a recreated Congressional Office of Technology Assessment and a more prominent role for the White House science adviser. But he offers no recom-

mendations (short of partisan political action) for ensuring such institutions can remain true to their purpose.

The politicization of science is a real problem, and one that may well be getting worse. As such, it is a concern worthy of serious, even-handed examination and well-considered proposals for reform. By this measure, *The Republican War on Science* fails. Mooney provides a shallow, one-sided polemic that will comfort Democratic constituencies but do little to ensure the sound use of science to inform normative policy decisions. In the end, Mooney can suggest little more than “Vote Democrat,” and that is hardly a prescription for needed institutional change. **R**

## The Free Market Remedy

*Reviewed by George C. Leef*

### THE CURE: How Capitalism Can Save American Health Care

by David Gratzler

325 pp; New York, N.Y.: Encounter Books, 2006

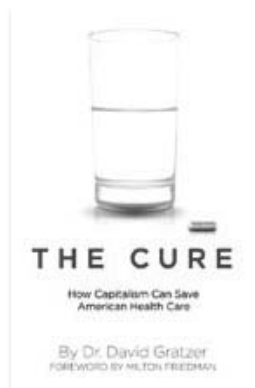
“Saul on the road to Damascus” political conversions are rare, but they do happen. One such convert is Dr. David Gratzler, who grew up in Canada believing, as most Canadians do, that Canada’s system of universal healthcare at government expense is superior to the healthcare systems of other nations, especially the United States.

But then he had his Saul moment:

*On a cold Canadian morning about a decade ago, late for a class, I cut through a hospital emergency room and came upon dozens of people on stretchers — waiting, moaning, begging for treatment. Some elderly patients had waited for up to five days in corridors before being admitted to beds. They smelled*

*of urine and sweat. As I navigated past the bodies, I began to question everything I thought I knew about health care.... Though I didn’t know it then, I had begun a journey into the heart of one of the great policy disasters of modern times.*

And thus did the future doctor learn that the appealing rhetoric about equality comes at a very steep price — a shortage of care.



Gratzler came to understand that Canada’s healthcare egalitarianism is disastrous for sick and injured people. We are fortunate that he has now turned his attention to the extremely chaotic system we have in the United States.

### TAXES AND MEDICINE

The root of our problems can be traced with unusual precision. Rarely can we say to the exact day when a socio-economic problem began, but in this case we can: October 26, 1943. That was the date the Internal Revenue Service ruled that employees would not have to pay income tax on the value of health insurance benefits provided by their employers. At the time,

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the ruling seemed simple and unimportant, but it would radically reshape U.S. healthcare.

During World War II, the federal government imposed price controls that covered employee wages. As good economists know, it is impossible to suppress competition for very long. Employers who wanted to attract more and better workers figured out that they could evade the wage controls by offering workers “free” benefits. When the IRS ruled that such benefits would not be taxed, the inevitable result was continuing growth of this new kind of income. Because of wartime controls on wages, employers became the main providers of health insurance in the United States.

Previously, nearly all Americans had paid for medical services the same way they paid for other services: in cash. Following the war, however, third-party payments would become the norm. This has to be one of the most enlightening examples of the phenomenon that one governmental intervention in the free market starts a chain of unanticipated and unwelcome consequences.

**BUREAUCRATIZATION** The switch from direct consumer payment to third-party payment largely took consumers out of the equation, thereby eliminating the most potent check on rising costs. Gratzner cites data compiled by the late Milton Friedman (who contributed the foreword to the book) showing that in 1946, Americans spent seven times as much on food, beverages, and tobacco as they did on medical care. Fifty years later, Americans spent more on medical care than on food, beverages, and tobacco. In 1962, 46 percent of medical care spending was still out-of-pocket, but by 2002, just 14 percent was.

This huge increase in healthcare spending has led to some improvement in treatment and human longevity. But much of the expenditure, Gratzner argues, is wasted. That is because our heavy reliance on third-party payments leads to bureaucratization of healthcare — the reams of paperwork, the labyrinthine insurance guidelines, the hurdles one must overcome in order to see the

provider and receive the care one wants.

Bureaucratization is undesirable for two reasons. First, it undermines both patient and doctor satisfaction because, to a greater and greater extent, decisions are made by distant insurance firms and government officials. Second, it leads to what Gratzner calls “bureaucratic displacement,” meaning that resources that could have gone into actual care of

## The IRS decision not to tax employer-provided health benefits started a chain of unanticipated consequences.

patients is instead sucked into the administrative cost of the system.

**SEEKING A CURE** Gratzner takes the reader through the history of governmental responses that have been touted as salvation for our healthcare woes. Richard Nixon pushed health maintenance organizations as a means of containing costs. Although politicians in search of populist votes have demonized HMOs, Gratzner does not believe that they were a bad development. He writes

*HMOs may have kept up their part of the bargain: quality care at reasonable prices. But Americans rejected the implicit paternalism.... [W]hen HMO bureaucrats told their patients that they could go to any family doctor as long as it was the one they were assigned, Americans promptly called Human Resources, and then their congressman.*

With HMOs fizzling out, policy analysts and politicians hunted for a new approach. The idea of Medical Savings Accounts (MSAs) was advanced by a coalition of free-market economists and conservative Republicans. MSAs were designed to overcome the problem of paternalism by encouraging Americans to put pre-tax dollars into accounts that could be used at their discretion. Congressional liberals, perhaps fearing that this approach would be popular and therefore deprive them of a big campaign issue, responded by placing stringent limits on MSAs. The MSA experiment was restricted to small businesses

and an arbitrary cap was placed on the number of people who could enroll nationwide. MSAs were strangled in the crib by politics.

Congress next tried a variation called Health Savings Accounts (HSAs). HSAs combine insurance against high and unpredictable medical expenses — which is what insurance should really be for — with a savings account funded with pre-tax dollars that can be used for routine medical expenses and can be “rolled over” from year to year if more is put in than is taken out. Gratzner thinks that HSAs are a big step in the right direction and registers his impatience with the

partisan attacks that have been leveled against them by policymakers who want to move to something like the Canadian system. He fears that HSAs may suffer the same fate as MSAs, unless Congress acts to free them of an unnecessary mandate that limits their attractiveness, namely that all enrolled individuals must have a high-deductible insurance policy. People do not all have the same medical circumstances and Gratzner contends that they ought to be free to decide whether such insurance really fits their needs. As long as the government insists on micro-managing healthcare, some people will be left unsatisfied.

Another boost politicians could give HSAs would be for governors to give their state employees the HSA option. In this regard, Gratzner specifically mentions California’s governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Furthermore, Congress should repeal a number of laws that impose needless regulatory costs. For example, the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 included an 18-month moratorium on reimbursements to new specialty hospitals. The moratorium was later extended to three years. Gratzner regards the law as an attack on efficiency. After quoting University of Rochester economist Charles Phelps that healthcare is “the most intensely regulated sector of the U.S. economy,” Gratzner concludes that “HSAs will never flourish as long as the heavy hand of government weighs down on the sector.”

That is the leitmotif of the book. Gov-

ernment is getting in the way of improvements in our healthcare system.

**NAYSAYERS** If anyone on the political Left reads *The Cure*, he will probably respond, "But the crucial issue is the poor! They don't have money for an HSA." In a sharply written chapter, Gratzner takes on and demolishes the myths about medical care for the poor. Contrary to sound bites you may have heard or bumper stickers you may have read, few Americans go without medical care when they need it.

To the extent that the nation does have a problem with medical care for the poor, it is aggravated by political tinkering such as mandatory issue laws. Howard Dean, whose incessant meddling with health insurance while he was governor of Vermont has wrecked the market there, comes in for especially heavy criticism. An iatrogenic disease is one caused by the doctor himself, and

in Vermont, Dr. Dean has brought on a debilitating illness in the health insurance market.

Gratzner also takes aim at the Food and Drug Administration, arguing that its regulatory regime, requiring pharmaceutical companies to prove that new drugs are both safe and effective, is harmful. The FDA's overly cautious approach to drugs prevents thousands of Ameri-

and federal laws and regulations that impede competition and innovation, we would get much more value for our healthcare dollars. Healthcare is not essentially different from other goods and services, and there is no more reason for governmental intervention in this market than in the market for computers, blue jeans, or anything else.

It is likely that the United States will be grappling with the issue of healthcare over the next several years. David Gratzner has written a book that will prove to be enormously helpful to those of us who want to avoid the blunder of moving into an even-more-politicized system, as many people on the Left say they want. Perhaps those people will have second thoughts if they stop and consider the possibility that if they get their way, they could be moaning in a waiting room for days, waiting for hospital beds, just like the unfortunate Canadians Gratzner saw. **R**

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### Gratzner's prescription for what ails American healthcare is simple: we need more choices.

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can patients from having access to medications that could be extremely beneficial for them.

**CONCLUSION** In a nutshell, Dr. Gratzner's prescription for what ails American healthcare is simple: we need freedom. If we could scrap the many state



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