MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

Eric Lichtblau, Patrick Radden Keefe, Geoffrey R Stone, Jameel Jaffer
and Rick Piltz examine free speech after Bush

PLUS: THE SATANIC VERSES AT 20
THE DENIAL MACHINE

Rick Piltz examines political interference in climate change research: a scandal he helped to expose
In March 2001, early in their first year in the White House, President Bush and Vice President Cheney set the framework for their approach to climate change policy by abandoning the Kyoto Protocol climate treaty process and rejecting regulatory limits on emissions of greenhouse gases. Also in 2001, with far less fanfare, the new administration began to align itself with an orchestrated global warming disinformation campaign designed to mislead the public about the scientific evidence for anthropogenic (human-caused) global warming and its likely harmful impacts. From that time onward, the administration combined a weak greenhouse-gas mitigation policy with a politically-driven spinning — and in some cases outright suppression — of communications on climate science by federal scientists.

Avoiding regulation of emissions was the key policy goal of the administration’s allies in the US fossil energy industry. The administration appeared to conclude, with good reason, that an honest acknowledgment of the scientific evidence on climate change would likely generate additional
pressure to adopt a stronger policy response. Thus, they opted to associate the administration with an exaggerated sense of fundamental scientific uncertainty about the reality and significance of anthropogenic global warming. Administration political officials sought to manage the flow of communications about climate change in such a way as to minimise the perception that science might be seen as conflicting with the administration’s political message on climate change policy. Rather than using the findings and assessments by the leading mainstream climate scientists as a basis for developing a climate change response strategy, the administration allowed its politics to drive its relationship to science.

In so doing, the administration became part of what I later termed the global warming denial machine. Outside of government, political operatives working for policy groups and ‘think tanks’, funded by corporate sponsors, most notably ExxonMobil, the largest US oil company, sought to undermine the essential conclusions reached by the leading climate scientists. Making use of a small number of ‘contrarian’ scientists whose views they found convenient, they succeeded in elevating their views in the political arena, in the media, and with public opinion, far out of proportion to their standing in the science community.

We had seen this alliance between industry interests and contrarian scientists at least as far back as the early 1990s, when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its first major assessment report and the US participated in negotiating the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the foundational climate treaty. We saw their influence again in the opposition to US participation in the Kyoto Protocol, under which most of the industrialised nations agreed to targets and timetables for reducing emissions.

In 1998, a ‘Global Climate Science Communication Action Plan’, developed at the American Petroleum Institute (the leading trade association and lobbying arm of the US oil industry) by industry representatives and political operatives with advocacy groups, laid out a media relations campaign in which contrarian scientists would be recruited, trained, and deployed to promote an air of scientific uncertainty about global warming. ‘Victory will be achieved when average citizens “understand” (recognise) uncertainties in climate science,’ the plan concluded. Thus, a method pioneered decades earlier by the tobacco industry was to be applied to fighting the battle against climate change regulatory policy. It wasn’t necessary for them to ‘win’ the debate about the reality of anthropogenic global warming; rather, it was necessary only to create the appearance of
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a deeply divided science community, thus helping to dissipate the will to
ction among political leaders and the public. When the Bush-Cheney
administration came to power in 2001, this campaign was able to move
directly into the White House.

I experienced some of the resulting collision between the world of
science and the world of politics while working in the coordination office of
the US Climate Change Science Program. The CCSP is the roughly $2 billion-
year programme through which an array of federal agencies coordinate
their support for scientific research and global observing systems. In this
senior staff office, where I served for ten years starting in 1995, we worked
closely with the leading federal science programme managers responsible
for supporting the research community, on the one hand, and were subject to
the White House policy apparatus, on the other.

The Clinton-Gore administration and its science policy leadership in the
White House Office of Science and Technology Policy had accepted the
conclusions of the comprehensive and authoritative scientific assessments
of climate change carried out by the IPCC – the large body of leading
scientists who were collectively awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.
They adopted the conclusion of the IPCC Second Assessment Report in 1995
that the balance of evidence suggested a discernible human influence on
global climate, and the IPCC’s projection of greater warming in the 21st
century.

In an effort to advance understanding of the implications of the IPCC
findings for the United States, the White House in 1997 had directed the
federal climate research programme to develop a national assessment of the
potential consequences of climate change. This impacts assessment was
carried out during the next several years, coordinated by a subset of the
programme office in which I was working and authored by a National
Assessment Synthesis Team made up of eminent scientists and experts.
Their report was delivered to the president and Congress in late 2000. It was
subsequently used as a source in reports of the IPCC and the US National
Academy of Sciences, and was praised during the next several years by
several committees of the Academy as a significant contribution of climate
science to societally relevant communication. It remains, to date, the most
comprehensive assessment of the potential consequences of climate change
for the United States.

Because its findings took the global warming problem seriously
and identified a range of likely adverse consequences for society and
the environment, the National Assessment aroused the hostility of the
denial machine. The Competitive Enterprise Institute, a policy group heavily funded by ExxonMobil, filed two lawsuits against the National Assessment, the first essentially seeking to prevent the federal government from acknowledging and distributing it, and the second seeking to have this taxpayer-funded report to the government deleted altogether from a government website (an act that could be termed ‘byte-burning’).

While these lawsuits were dropped before being adjudicated, the administration ultimately awarded to the plaintiffs through politics what they couldn’t win in the courts, and from the fall of 2002 onward began systematically to suppress official references to the National Assessment in science programme documents, including annual reports to Congress; withdrawing support from the coordinated process of scientist-stakeholder interaction and assessment that had been initiated by the National Assessment; and making clear that no follow-on National Assessment would be undertaken.

The White House agent who directed the Climate Change Science Program, and its participating agencies, to suppress references to the National Assessment was a former lawyer-lobbyist with the American Petroleum Institute named Philip Cooney, who was now ensconced as chief of staff at the Council on Environmental Quality, the White House environmental policy office. Cooney was active in Climate Change Science Program governance as a representative of the White House policy apparatus. Programme publications required his editorial review and approval prior to publication and distribution.

I became more aware of his increasingly aggressive role when he began to alter draft programme reports to Congress with which I was involved, after they had been reviewed in detail and approved by the science programme leadership. His many editing changes, for example, had the effect of introducing an exaggerated sense of fundamental scientific uncertainty about human-driven climate change, about which there really was no fundamental uncertainty in the science community, and also of altering or removing text that suggested the likelihood of adverse environmental impacts of climate change. He deleted even minor references to the National Assessment. This burial of the National Assessment, a study and a process with significant implications for society, was criticised by a committee of the National Academy of Sciences, to no avail.

Although his editing was egregious enough, my main concern was for the very legitimacy of having an industry lobbyist with the authority of the White House intervening in scientifically based communication.
The director of the programme, a political appointee in the Department of Commerce, would negotiate to some extent with Cooney about the scientific content of programme publications. But none of the senior programme leadership seemed willing or able to push back by raising the question of the legitimacy of this kind of intervention.

The presence of a White House official with a clear political agenda within the governing circle of the science programme had a chilling effect on communication by the programme leadership. With their antennae out to discern White House political sensitivities on science issues, a kind of anticipatory self-censorship set in. My critical perspective on the leadership was increasingly evident within certain circles, but there was no way to challenge a White House official directly unless one was ready to be removed from one's position.

There was much that I didn't realise at the time. For example, only later, as a result of reading email traffic that ultimately was released by the White House pursuant to the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act, did we learn that Cooney was reporting directly to Vice President Cheney's office and to the president's chief political strategist Karl Rove. Thus he served as a kind of linchpin of the global warming disinformation campaign, connecting the interests of the oil industry from whence he had come to the inner circles of the White House. His role in this political-corporate strategy and division of labour was to serve as a kind of political policeman of the climate science programme itself.

In 2003, the Council on Environmental Quality demanded such fundamental alterations of the text on climate change in a draft annual environmental assessment report by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) — by seeking, for example, to replace references to the evidence for anthropogenic global warming with a discredited study that had been funded by the oil industry — that EPA scientists ultimately deleted their discussion of climate science altogether rather than have the agency's integrity and credibility undermined. The EPA administrator, Christine Todd Whitman, facing a hopeless situation vis-à-vis White House censors in a political climate she later described as 'brutal', resigned shortly thereafter.

Even earlier, starting in October 2002, around the same time that Cooney had begun marking up reports that I was editing and shepherding through the review and approval process, vibrant EPA websites dealing with global warming issues fell silent, with no new material posted for the next several years. The silencing of government websites appeared to be one more mode of censorship, to accompany the doctoring of federal reports,
the disregarding or misrepresenting of scientific assessments, the selective blocking of contact between journalists and federal climate scientists, the pressure on federal scientists to avoid the use of the term ‘global warming’ and so forth. The aim was always the same; the methods varied to suit the situation.

In 2004, 62 leading US scientists issued a public statement, subsequently signed by thousands of other US scientists, questioning the administration’s scientific integrity. A report issued by the Union of Concerned Scientists began to document a variety of methods through which the administration’s misuse of science operated, including suppressing and distorting scientific research and subjecting candidates for scientific advisory committees to political litmus tests.

But at the start of the second Bush-Cheney term in 2005, climate science was still typically being reported in the US media in the manner usually reserved for political debates: by ‘balancing’ the views of opposing sides – typically, with leading mainstream climate scientists reporting widely shared conclusions on one side, and climate change deniers and contrarian scientists on the other. The extent to which administration officials knew better, but had chosen deliberately to censor and misrepresent the scientific intelligence on climate change to suit their political purposes, was not widely understood.

It became evident to me from observing the programme leadership that the political policing of communications was likely to become, if anything, more aggressive rather than less. In March 2005, I resigned from the programme, with the intention of speaking publicly and providing documentation of what I had observed on the inside. I realised that certain things had not come to public attention because they were invisible from the outside, that unless someone would get the ball rolling by beginning to reveal something of the inner workings of the relationship between the White House and the science programme, the story would not be covered adequately. To fully understand my rights as a former employee of the programme, I sought counsel from the Government Accountability Project, a prominent whistleblower protection organisation.

In June 2005, we made documents available to New York Times journalist Andrew Revkin, which resulted in a front-page story with the title ‘White House aide edited climate reports – softened links to greenhouse gases’. The story was picked up and covered in electronic and print media across the US and abroad. A few days later Cooney resigned from the White House, and shortly thereafter it was announced that he would be taking up a position rather readily gases.  

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Others came forward. James Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, the most eminent federal climate scientist, went public in the New York Times with a charge that political operatives at NASA headquarters had attempted to block his communications with the media and require him to pre-clear future public statements with the political level of the agency. Negative publicity forced the NASA hierarchy to back down.

Studies issued later by the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Government Accountability Project, based on interviews with dozens of federal scientists and a survey of hundreds of others, as well as an examination of thousands of pages of official documents released under the Freedom of Information Act, documented a widespread pattern of official censorship and political interference. Official media policies that stifled contact between journalists and scientists were found to be a principal method by which politically unwelcome research findings were kept under wraps.

In November 2005, a few months after Hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans, Thomas Knutson, a scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration whose climate modelling research suggested the likelihood of increased hurricane intensity under projected future global warming, was kept away from the agency’s media briefing at the end of the hurricane season. Only government scientists who said they saw no connection between hurricane activity and global warming were allowed to speak. Knutson had earlier been directed not to talk with the media. A number of scientists connected with the agency criticised this and other instances of politicisation of science to journalists who reported the story.

Media coverage began to shift. Stories about climate science censor­ship by the administration started to appear in the Washington Post and other leading newspapers; the US public affairs television programmes CBS 60 Minutes and PBS Frontline ran special investigative stories; Newsweek and Rolling Stone magazines ran lengthy cover stories; and electronic and print media outside the US (in addition to the BBC, which had started covering the issue early on) picked up the issue. By the end of 2006, climate change stories in the leading US media no longer routinely balanced the
presentation of widely accepted scientific conclusions with contrarian viewpoints.

With the new Democratic majority in Congress following the November 2006 election, legislative oversight of the administration's actions on climate change, which had become almost moribund, was revived. Several committees in both the Senate and House of Representatives held hearings early in 2007 that illuminated the problem of political interference with federal climate scientists. I testified before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform and the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation and found that lawmakers understood that their need for unfettered scientific expertise is ill-served by censorship. US climate change policy has for some time been a victim of partisan division, but few of the administration's allies on Capitol Hill were eager to defend its record on scientific integrity.

In 2007, the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report concluded with greater than 90 per cent certainty that the majority of observed global warming during the past 50 years is a result of human activity. Perhaps with the sole exception of Vice President Cheney, who continued to characterise the state of knowledge in quasi-denialist terms, the administration began at least to acknowledge the reality of human-driven warming. The denial machine lost traction with the US political elite and with the major corporate interests, which moved toward negotiating a more meaningful policy response to global warming.

However, the administration continued to censor and play down official acknowledgment of the likely impacts of global warming. In October 2007, reportedly under pressure from the office of the Vice President, all substantive discussion of the likely impacts of climate change on human health was removed from draft Senate testimony by the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In December 2007, the White House suppressed a draft report by the Environmental Protection Agency that concluded that the consequences of greenhouse gas emissions endanger public welfare—an official finding that would trigger a legal requirement for regulatory control of emissions under the Clean Air Act.

Through these and other actions, the administration has essentially 'run out the clock' and leaves office having delayed for eight years an honest high-level acknowledgment of the implications of climate change, with a corollary failure to initiate a meaningful response strategy— to avoid impacts of climate...
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of climate change that can't be managed, while managing the impacts that
can't be avoided. This administration's legacy of censorship and evasion
confronts its successors as they face the necessity of changing course and
addressing with greater urgency this fundamental challenge. 📌

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