Helping the President

PRESIDENT OBAMA’S EARLY STRONG STATEMENTS ABOUT SCIENCE, UNDERSCORED BY THE outstanding team of scientific experts he has assembled and big bucks in the stimulus package, have been a breath of fresh air. Understandably, there is some temptation to rest easy and not worry about happenings in Washington, comforted by the thought that U.S. science and science policy are in good hands. This would be a huge mistake.

Let me offer a few brief comments from the perspective of a former science adviser to President Clinton, who also understood the importance of science. I don’t presume to tell the new science adviser, John Holdren, how to do his job. Rather, I want to share a few lessons I learned that might shed some light on the environment in which the science adviser operates, and suggest how the scientific community can be helpful in forging a strong science agenda for the nation.

First, the matters that consume most of the president’s time include immediate crises (the economy), security threats, foreign policy, health care, education, energy, climate change, and the environment. Science is important to these but rarely urgent. Second, all of the president’s senior advisers have the president’s ear, so providing advice to the president means reaching these senior aides—including the Chief of Staff, director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), National Economic Advisor, Domestic Policy Advisor, National Security Advisor, and White House czars, among others—and building consensus among them on science and technology issues. Third, the science adviser cannot be seen as a representative of the science community. Rather, the adviser must focus on providing the president with the best confidential advice on scientific and technical matters and evidence-based policy options.

One of the greatest challenges a science adviser faces is motivating federal agencies to open their silo doors and work together on behalf of the president’s priorities, which are usually larger than a single agency. Interagency cooperation is difficult in large part because of Congress, where appropriations subcommittees wield enormous influence over how agencies spend money. Here, the science adviser can make use of the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC), which is chaired by the president and includes the vice president, director of the Office of Science Technology and Policy, and heads of OMB and most of the federal agencies. The NSTC deals with issues that cut across many federal agencies, such as high-performance computing and information technology, emerging technologies, energy, and climate change. If the president wishes to consider a new initiative, an assessment of the nation’s current situation and future opportunities is carried out by a working group that includes experts from all the relevant agencies, who are in touch with the research community. Once the report is approved by the NSTC principals, the president can decide whether to support the recommendations in the next budget request. This is how the National Nanotechnology Initiative was developed in the Clinton administration. Congress recognizes the importance of the NSTC.

For President Obama’s science agenda to succeed, he and Holdren will need the scientific community’s best ideas, active participation, and widened involvement with the public—most specifically with Congress. Congress needs to hear from the various disciplines and sectors of our diverse research community. And this community must speak with one voice on fundamental issues of policy such as education, underrepresentation and the workforce, research funding and accountability, the challenges to early-career researchers, government regulation, and scientific integrity.

One way of accomplishing such a goal is for the leading science, mathematics, engineering, and biomedical research societies to work together to make this effort a top priority. Perhaps the American Association for the Advancement of Science could get this started, inasmuch as it includes all of these disciplines. It would take considerable leadership to pull this off, but the politicians would be speechless and the positive impact could be enormous. The world’s economic crisis makes it difficult for nations to focus on long-term investments. It is up to the scientific community in each nation to keep these issues front and center.

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