

SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY



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Yes, Virginia, There Is a War on Science

Conservative Attempts to Argue Otherwise Have Been Feeble

By Chris Mooney

I HATE TO CONFESS IT, but lately I’ve been feeling a bit wistful for the arguments of conservative science pundit Tom Bethell, author of the 2005 polemic *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Science*. Granted, the “Incorrect Guide to Science” would probably have been a more accurate title, in that Bethell is just plain wrong about everything from evolution (which he tries to debunk) to global warming (which he argues isn’t human-caused) to African AIDS (which, shockingly, he calls a “political epidemic”).

Yet despite such outrages, there’s something bracingly honest about Bethell’s book—he really *doesn’t* accept mainstream science on many issues, and so he tries, very straightforwardly, to argue that his facts are right and everybody else’s are wrong.

A new wave of conservative science punditry—epitomized by an essay by Yuval Levin in *The New*

Atlantis entitled “Science and the Left,” which was itself recently publicized by former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson in an oped in the *The Washington Post*—demonstrably lacks such candor. Setting out to debunk the idea that there really is a “war on science” coming from the right, these writers don’t bother engaging on the facts of the case at all. They don’t attempt to show that, say, conservative anti-evolutionists are right, or that conservative global warming deniers know what they’re talking about.

Instead, Levin and Gerson ignore, trivialize, and even mock the very serious argument that scientific information has been systematically mistreated under this administration and by the American political right. Here’s Gerson: “There are few things in American politics more irrationally ideological, more fanatically faith-based, than the accusation that Republicans are conducting a ‘war on science.’”

As for Levin: “Beneath these grave accusations, it turns out, are some remarkably flimsy grievances, most of which seem to amount to political disputes about policy questions in which science plays a role.”

And that’s it for these authors—rather than taking apart the “war on science” argument, they simply assert with a wave of the hand that we’re all confused, that the facts of science aren’t under attack from the right, it’s just that disagreements have occurred over ethics and policies. But of course, that’s hokum.

As the author of the original book making this argument—*The Republican War on Science*—I took pains to show that in each of my case studies, the scientific information itself was under attack. And as for the literally hundreds of scientists employed by this government who have now been shown, in successive surveys conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists, to have experienced political interference in their work? Once again, these scientists trade in facts, analysis, and expertise. They know the elementary science–policy distinction as well as everyone; as government researchers they live and breathe it. They’re *still* outraged.

For Levin and Gerson, though, dismissing concerns about a conservative “war on science” just serves as a springboard for another offensive—trying to show that the political left’s loving embrace of science might well lead it off a cliff. Levin rightly observes that there’s something in the spirit of modern liberalism that grows out of the scientific revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries, which unleashed a profound distrust of hoary old authorities and empty traditions (especially religious ones). Levin even admits: “The left is therefore generally justified in thinking of itself as the party of science.” (Why, thank you.)

But that’s just a set-up: Levin’s lengthy essay (parroted by Gerson) proceeds to argue that the liberal embrace of science engenders two key conflicts—one, with its support of environmental values, and second, with its support for equality. Science, according to Levin, can undermine both.

But the arguments adduced to show this hardly withstand scrutiny. True, in the European green movement we do see a rift between science and a value system rooted in the desire to preserve the authenticity of “nature”—hence the sabotaging of biotech crop fields. But this case notwithstanding, there are many more ways in which science *bolsters* the environmental cause—most obviously, by allowing for the serious and detailed analysis of environmental impacts and problems.

Environmental scientists, based at universities across the country, hardly see any conflict between the two chief words that describe their professions. What does irk them, however, is to conduct a painstaking study of an environmental problem, only to find some industry-funded scientist with the gall to assert that their facts are wrong—and then to further watch that industry-funded scientist get pulled before Congress by conservatives to testify, or get used by the Bush Office of Management and Budget to torpedo a proposed environmental regulation.

But then Levin strays still farther, arguing that some fundamental conflict exists between the liberal embrace of science on the one hand, and the liberal concern for preserving equality on the other. You’ll only follow Levin down this road if you share a key assumption—that abortion, in vitro fertilization, and genetic pre-screening constitute a “new eugenics,” which I certainly do not. *Science Progress’s* Jonathan Moreno has already taken apart Gerson’s (er, Levin’s) clumsy attempt to draw an analogy between old eugenics and “new,” pointing out that progressives were among the strongest critics of the old eugenics, and that some conservatives continued to embrace eugenics even after WWII.

But let me just explode one of Levin’s additional assertions. “Science, simply put,” he writes, “cannot account for human equality, and does not offer reasons to believe we are all equal. Science measures our material and animal qualities, and it finds them to be patently unequal.” Oh, really? What more equalizing force could there be than a book like Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which

shows that racist theories cannot explain how it is that Europeans managed to take over virtually the entire Earth—rather, distinct environmental and technological advantages made all the difference. Score one for science, and one for equality at the same time.

In the end, Levin and Gerson (who just does the Cliff Notes version) fundamentally ignore the assault upon scientific conclusions and expertise that now exists, and that emanates largely, in this country, from the political right. Instead, they seek to turn the tables and depict science as a kind of Kryptonite for the political *left*, because it undermines some of our core ideals. But that's just wrong—science helps advance and strengthen those ideals.

Finally, then, Levin and Gerson don't just conveniently ignore the core of the "war on science" argument; they also creatively redefine liberal ideals and values so as to create greater tensions between them than actually exist. Fundamentally, they're ignoring the truth about what progressives think and argue—and thus, unfortunately, engaging in still more conservative obscurantism. **sp**

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