

## It's All About Science—Or Is It?

As I write this, in late January, most people in the United States are breathing a sigh of relief as an old administration has ridden into the sunset and a new one is settling in. And, if you believe the columns, blogs, and just the word on the street, among those most relieved about the change in Washington, D.C., are the nation's scientists.

President Barack Obama has already made public his choices for many of the scientific posts in the new administration, and for the most part, these names have drawn public acclaim. A notable example: his selection for Secretary of Energy is Steven Chu, a Nobel Laureate. When was the last time we had a Nobelist in the top energy job? Actually, the answer is "never." (Didn't one relatively recent president nominate his *dentist* for the post?)

Before he relocated to the Energy Department, Dr. Chu headed the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and was a professor of physics at the University of California at Berkeley. His primary interest appears to be finding environmentally friendly alternatives to fossil fuels—quite a change from the "drill, baby, drill" philosophy of the Bush administration. (Or was that the philosophy of the dentist?) His nomination, President Obama said, "should send a signal to all that my administration will value science; we will make decisions based on the facts; and we understand that the facts demand bold action."

Which brings me to the topic of Yucca Mountain. Like many others, I have some real concerns about the project's viability under the new administration. Remember back about a year and a half ago, when the presidential candidates were speaking out on Yucca Mountain? Candidate Obama

said, "After spending billions of dollars on Yucca Mountain, there are still significant questions about whether nuclear waste can be safely stored there. So, at this time, [I] can't support the Yucca Mountain project and believe we should redirect spending on alternatives, such as improving the safety and security of spent fuel at plant sites around the country. At the same time, we should continue looking for a safe, long-term disposal solution *based on sound science.*" (Emphasis mine.)

Maybe President Obama genuinely believes that Yucca Mountain is a repository not of nuclear waste, but of decades of bad science. Or maybe he knows that one way to keep Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev., a long-time Yucca opponent) on his side is to agree with him on the Yucca Mountain issue. Who knows which is true? Nonetheless, this is one area where there appears to be a little chink in that wall of sound science. During his confirmation hearings, when asked about his short-term plans for high-level nuclear waste, Chu responded that he would "try to use the best possible scientific analysis to try to figure out a way we can go forward on nuclear disposal." Not too many specifics there, you may have noticed, but then, you don't need a Nobel Prize to know which way the wind is blowing. Before the hearings even began, Sen. Reid had been quoted as saying that any energy secretary candidate who supports the Yucca Mountain Project would not get through the Senate confirmation process. Already, there are rumors that the Yucca Mountain Project's fiscal 2009 budget is being cut by another \$100 million (over and above the \$100 million hit the project took in 2008). Maybe, instead of get-



### *The Culture of Facts Can't Beat the Culture of Politics*

ting a knife through the heart, the project will just be nibbled to death by ducks.

Under the Bush administration, we had eight years where political ideology trumped science again and again. President Obama has vowed to bring science back into favor—except, I fear, for Yucca Mountain. When politics intervenes, science and facts just don't stand a chance.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor ■