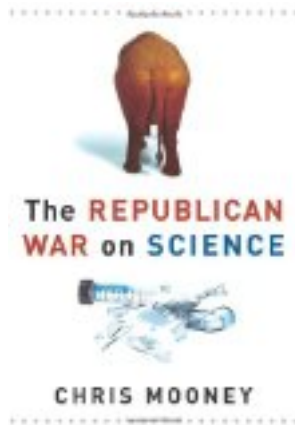


The Republican War on Science

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Science, we imagine, is the realm of objective disinterested geniuses reporting back the findings from their expensive equipment, telling us truths about the world. Politics, on the other hand, is seen as the place for sleazy and corrupt jerks who lie to us in everything they do and try to make everything fit their existing worldviews. So is it any surprise that when the two things meet we're in for a show?

Journalist Chris Mooney has made a name for himself by writing magazine articles that make this intersection, especially under the Bush administration, entertaining. He's recently released his first book, *The Republican War on Science*, which tries to combine the various individual stories into a damning case of science politicization. The book tackles a variety of subjects, including:

- global warming
- nutrition guidelines
- fishing regulations
- evolution
- embryonic stem cells
- safe sex

Each one gets a chapter written in the style of a magazine article (indeed, many have been published as magazine articles), opening with an interesting person or event and expanding to show how a group of Bush backers (drawn from major industry and the religious right) have concocted their own pseudoscience in an attempt to spread confusion about the truth, with a particular focus on its effects in Washington, where Mooney is based. Mooney bookends these stories with some more general thoughts about the relations of conservatives and science.

The book has been something of a surprise success, recently making it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list, and Mooney has been busy doing a book tour for it. I went to see him when he spoke just down the street at Porter Square Books and talked to him a bit afterwards as he signed my copy. The audience was interested and engaged. I suspect a lot of it was typical anger at the Bush administration (or “the neocon radicals up in Washington and the media” as the angry sort who call in to radio shows and so on always seem to put it), but I think this particular issue strikes at the heart of people’s dislike for the administration: the administration refuses to go along with reality, even in its most pure form.

The book itself is a respectable and highly readable (I went through it in a day’s free time) piece of work, although I could not help but feel a little disappointed. In an apparent attempt to gain respectability, Mooney adopts a detached journalistic — almost legalistic — style. While Mooney doesn’t pull any punches factually — he will call a lie a lie and refuses to be pulled into the trap of equating conservative science abuses with liberal ones — such a style lacks the verve of Mooney’s more strident online writing, such as when he wrote about Michael Crichton’s global warming denialist novel *State of Fear*:

Let’s face it: Such writing is pure porn for global warming deniers, in much the same way that fictional accounts of UFO abduction skeptics converting into true believers titillate UFO fans. [...] By the book’s end, one can only ask: What planet is Michael Crichton living on? Because this one is clearly getting warmer. (cite)

By comparison, Mooney’s book-long exposé of numerous incidents of Bush administration distortion and dishonesty concludes more like this:

these considerations all suggest science politicization has reached a nadir with the Bush administration [...] Considered this way, Bush administration abuses and distortions of science come to look more and more like a large-scale political strategy. (241f)

And despite Mooney’s attempts at moderation and fairness, he hasn’t won any favors from the press. *Publishers Weekly*, in a favorable review, called it “very readable, and understandably partisan” while the *Washington Post* attacked it

as “surprisingly unconvincing”, “polemic[al]”, and “a kind of conspiracy theory”. Since the mainstream was apparently ready to consider the book partisan no matter the style, Mooney probably would have been better off writing a little more strongly.

But what about conservative readers? At the book signing, someone asked Mooney if he thought the book would reach them. Mooney doubted that any of the relevant politicians would actually read it. ‘But, you know, maybe someone will say to them, “Things have gotten so bad that there’s now a book claiming we’re at war with science!”’ he said. ‘Maybe that will have some effect.’