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The Junkman, Fox News & the Union of Concerned Scientists

A study in careless, unprofessional journalism

By

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Since he took office as President of the United States, George W. Bush has had at best a strained relationship with the scientific community. Though his defenders would dispute it, he has essentially adopted a blowtorch policy toward the environment. He has also run roughshod over the recommendations of renowned scientific committees and review boards in areas where his religious and/or ideological views conflicted with those of mainstream science. Countless examples could be presented—his "healthy forests" initiative which runs afoul of just about everything that is currently known about forested ecosystems and fire, his policies on global warming mitigation, his decision to replace two pro-stem cell researchers on the President's Council on Bioethics with three members opposed to research, his opposition to science based salmon recovery policies in the Columbia and Snake River watersheds in Washington State and the Klamath Basin in California, and many more.

On Feb. 18 of this year, the Union of Concerned Scientists released a statement, and an accompanying report, protesting the Bush administration's handling of science in public policy (UCS, 2004). In it they called for legislative reforms to restore scientific integrity to federal policy. According to the report, the administration has suppressed scientific findings from federal agencies, taken actions that have undermined the quality of scientific advisory panels, and even distorted established scientific data to the extent of promoting faulty research from advocacy groups funded by industry and extremist special interests at the expense of established peer-reviewed consensus. It was signed by over 60 of the world's leading scientists, including 20 Nobel Laureates.

On Feb. 27 Fox News ran an editorial by Steven Milloy attacking the UCS report (Fox, Feb. 27, 2004). Milloy, who is also known as "the Junk Man" in reference to his "Junk Science" web site, has a long and checkered history. He got his start in the early 90's as a lobbyist for the Philip Morris Company, where he was contracted at top dollar rates to lobby against the substantial body of scientific evidence linking second hand smoke to lung cancer. From there he moved on to a number of other anti-environmental front groups such as the Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC), the Environmental Policy Analysis Network, NoMoreScares.com, and numerous lobbying and public relations contracts with clients in various polluting industries. Along the way he has waged war at one time or another against climate change science, clean air, public health laws, food safety regulations, and much more. He is known for the extreme viciousness of his attacks on those whose views do not support his or those of his clients ¹.

He is also Fox News' primary source of "information" and commentary on science related subjects, and the UCS report is no exception. The editorial, titled "Enviros commence election-year attack", reveals much about Milloy's quality of scholarship and that of Fox News as well. Like so much else Milloy has written, there is little here worthy of comment. The editorial consists almost entirely of cheap shots at "left-wing, eco-extremists" and their "anti-biotechnology, anti-chemical, anti-nuclear, anti-defense and anti-business screeds", and irrelevant anecdotes - not a single one of which is properly cited to any source in a manner that would allow it to be investigated by a thoughtful reader.

One of his claims sticks out however. In a moment of carelessness, Milloy inadvertently made a statement that actually can be investigated, which allows us to examine the quality of his research. He tells us that,

"The UCS report was issued along with a statement - signed by 12 Nobel Prize winners - protesting the Bush administration's alleged 'misuse of science.' I suppose UCS' hoped the Nobel laureates would add gravitas to its silly report."

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This comment caught my eye immediately because it was well known that the statement had been signed by 20 Nobel Laureates, not 12. Where, I wondered, did he get the figure of 12 from—a seemingly random number that had little resemblance to the actual one?

The release of the UCS report was accompanied by a press release, which can be read at their web site at, www.ucsusa.org/news/press_release.cfm?newsID=381. That press release revealed was followed at the bottom by a list of signatories that included 12 Nobel Laureates. Aha, I thought—this appears to be where Milloy got the figure of 12. However, the list began with a heading that read, "Among the statement signers are". Now to a careful reader, these words would imply that the list to follow was a *partial* one. Furthermore, it stands to reason that in addition to the press release, the UCS web site would also provide access to the full statement and report themselves, and that these would include a full list of signatories. A check of the same web page revealed a link to the full report, available at www.ucsusa.org/global_environment/rsi/page.cfm?pageID=1322 from where it can be read in part, or downloaded in full in PDF format. A check of this page reveals a link to a full list of signatories at www.ucsusa.org/global_environment/rsi/page.cfm?pageID=1335. This list had the expected 20 Nobel Laureate signatories.

Once I had found and read the press release, it took me a mere 2 mouse clicks and less than 40 seconds to find the full signatory list at the same web site. This was apparently too much work for Milloy. It appears that upon learning of the UCS statement, he went to the UCS web site, found the press release and the partial list at the bottom, and immediately flew off the handle and went to press with the figure of 12 Nobel Laureate signatories before bothering to even read the heading the partial list began with, much less invest 40 seconds worth of research himself! And Fox News, whose scholarship and professionalism are no better than his, was only too happy to rush to press with his editorial without investing another 40 seconds of their own. After a blunder of this magnitude, Milloy goes on to say,

"But none of the Nobelists have any notable expertise in any of the public policy issues raised in the report. A Nobel Prize for accomplishment in particle physics or retrovirus research doesn't automatically translate into expertise on global warming and other regulatory issues."

Retrovirus research *does* however have direct relevance to public health policy (the HIV virus is a retrovirus) which is explicitly mentioned in the UCS statement. Even the partial signatory list Milloy used mentions Harold Varmus, whose 1989 Nobel Prize was for his research on the involvement of retroviruses in the origin of many cancers (Nobel E-Museum, 2004). Cancer and carcinogen regulation are crucial parts of public health policy—a fact Milloy ought to know considering how much high priced time he has invested over the years in protecting tobacco companies from the science linking cigarette smoke to cancer! As for global warming, the statement was also signed by Mario Molina and F. Sherwood Rowland, whose work with atmospheric ozone chemistry (a known greenhouse gas and an important part of the radiative energy budget and temperature dynamics of the atmosphere) won them the Nobel Prize in 1995, to the extreme consternation of global warming and ozone depletion skeptics and ultra-conservative special interests (Nobel E-Museum, 2004). Both names are also mentioned on the same partial signatory list Milloy used—right in front of his unseeing eyes. Signatories also include Kevin Trenberth, head of the Climate Analysis Section at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, CO. Though not a Nobel Laureate, Dr. Trenberth is one of the world's leading experts in global warming. Not surprisingly, Milloy avoids any mention of him, and to the best of my knowledge, Dr. Trenberth has never once been consulted by Fox News either for any information or commentary on global warming science and policy, though other more thorough news agencies regularly seek his feedback. The statement also addresses endangered species issues, where the Bush Administration's record is particularly egregious. Relevant signatories here included National Medal of Science and Crawford Prize winning entomologist E. O. Wilson and National Medal of Science winning entomologist Thomas Eisner. Wilson is generally regarded as the father of modern conservation biology science, and Eisner's is personally responsible for almost everything that is known today about entire classes of some insects, including many that are crucial to global biodiversity. If anyone alive today qualifies as an expert on endangered species and biodiversity issues, it is these two. Milloy, of course, carefully avoids any mention of this.

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All this information is easily accessible via the internet and as mentioned, the full list of signatories is available at the UCS web site along with the report. Even a few moments worth of proper research would have turned it up. Milloy obviously did not bother, and neither did Fox News. Scholarship this sloppy would be inexcusable in a high school term paper, much less in the reporting of a large news agency and the "experts" they consult for their information. Yet this sort of unprofessionalism is commonplace with Milloy. Given Fox News' own track record for carelessness, it is no wonder that they depend on someone like him for the bulk of their science based and environmental commentary. According to Nielson, Fox News is now America's most watched cable news channel. Though they have fewer viewers than CNN, Fox has more total viewer-hours watched because their audience typically tunes in for longer periods (FAIR, 2004). In large part, this is because they share Fox's extreme conservative ideology and are drawn to the personality driven opinion programming which is their hallmark. I have many friends and family members who are regular Fox News viewers, and it is commonplace for me, during visits to find Fox News running continuously in the background for hours at a time - even during meals. In virtually every case, these people have told me that they watch Fox News because they are sick of the "liberal media". Not once has anyone indicated to me that they prefer Fox because they had independently investigated their reporting and/or research and found it to be more thorough and accurate than that of their competitors. It is revealing, and frightening, to think that a news agency this large can be at once so careless with facts, and yet so popular. With so many Americans depending almost exclusively on sources like Milloy and Fox News for their "information", it is little wonder that the United States can so easily elect presidents that are illiterate in science and public health issues.

More on Steven Milloy can be found at Jim Norton's Correcting Myths from Steven Milloy (<http://info-pollution.com/milloy.htm>) page and the Wikipedia article about him (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Milloy).

Footnotes

- 1) One can gather the extent of Milloy's viciousness by considering that in October 1999 when Dr. David Rall, founder of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences and a widely renowned public health expert, was killed in a tragic car accident, Milloy actually *rejoiced* over his death publicly. At his Junk Science web site he posted an "Obituary of the Day" in which he wrote, "Scratch one junk scientist... ", and then proceeded to elaborate on how much better the world was with Rall dead. His comments drew sharp criticism from the scientific and environmental communities, and the Environmental Working Group sent a letter of protest to the Cato Institute (where Milloy was, and still is, currently employed). Then Cato president Edward Crane, who was equally shocked, disavowed the institute from Milloy's comments referring to them as "an inexcusable lapse in judgment and civility." A few days later after the Washington Post carried a story about the incident (October 12, 1999), a thoroughly unrepentant Milloy responded saying, "he was a bad guy when he was alive... Death did not improve his track record - no matter how many letters the Environmental Working Group sends to the Cato Institute." Grist magazine also ran an article about the incident titled, "Death Don't Have No Mercy" (Grist, October 18, 1999; www.gristmagazine.com/muck/muck101899.asp). Rall (www.niehs.nih.gov/external/rallobit.htm), who by all accounts of colleagues and those who knew him was a gracious man and a consummate professional, left behind a wife, two children, and two grandchildren. To date, Milloy has vehemently refused to apologize to them or to the scientific community for his remarks.

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