President's New Adviser Ready to Put Science in Its Place

Andrew Lawler

After a long vacancy, the nation's top science job may be filled by fall. President George W. Bush last week chose John H. Marburger III, a 60-year-old physicist, former university president, and current national lab chief, as his nominee for the post. Marburger vows to bring scientific rigor to the Administration's decisions but warns that he will be just one of many voices offering advice on hot-button issues such as ballistic missile defense, stem cells, and global warming.

Marburger's nomination, first reported by Science's online daily news service, ScienceNOW (sciencenow.sciencemag.org), was sealed in a 15-minute Oval Office meeting with Bush on 20 June. A lifelong Democrat, Marburger says he will keep personal opinions to himself—and he advises the rest of the community to do the same. "Let's not put science in the position of opposing but in the position of informing," adds Marburger, who directs Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island and served as president of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, for 14 years.

Science policy officials greeted Bush's choice with plaudits—and relief. Many were pleased to learn that the White House will now get a boost in technical competence, after worrying that the president has made some key R&D-related decisions without adequate scientific advice (Science, 11 May, p. 1041).

Marburger is "smart, sensible, cautious—but candid," says Neal Lane, science adviser to former President Bill Clinton and now a physicist at Rice University in Houston. "I feel really good about the appointment." Adds Massachusetts Institute of Technology physicist Ernest Moniz, former chief scientist at the Department of Energy (DOE), which oversees Brookhaven: "This is a good choice: He has both academic and lab expertise."

Marburger took the Stony Brook job in 1980 after leaving the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, where he was dean of arts and sciences and a researcher in nonlinear optics. As Stony Brook's president, he built up a modest health science research and clinical program as well as a high-energy physics effort. He also headed the 80-member Universities Research Association during the political battles over the Superconducting Super Collider, which was cancelled.

Colleagues describe Marburger as a gregarious manager with broad interests and a sophisticated understanding of the relation between science and politics. Those skills were put to use in the test in 1998, when DOE brought him in to rescue Brookhaven from a crisis in which researchers and community activists were battling over claims that the lab was endangering the environment (Science, 25 February 2000, p. 1382). Some scientists, grumbling that Marburger may be too well attuned to public relations, are still angry that DOE shut a research reactor at Brookhaven on Marburger's watch. "People are disappointed he doesn't show more passion for research," complains one Brookhaven researcher who thinks that nuclear physics got shortchanged.

Marburger insists that the lab was losing public support and that fighting to save the reactor would have been a mistake. Indeed, many applaud his efforts to create an atmosphere of trust between activists and scientists. "He took a nervous, fearful, and hostile community and did a remarkable job turning it around," says Patricia Dehmer, chief of DOE's basic energy research division. Community activists agree. DOE has consistently given high marks to Brookhaven's operator—Brookhaven Science Associates, a consortium of Stony Brook and Battelle Memorial Institute—since it took over in 1998 with Marburger as director.
In his new job, Marburger says he will stick to providing scientific and technical, not ethical, advice. On stem cell research, for example, he says “no one doubts stem cells are valuable to research and hold tremendous promise—on that, there’s no scientific controversy.” But he adds that the matter “is not going to be decided by science.”

Marburger acknowledges that climate studies have shown that human activity is at least partly responsible for global warming. But he says the decision on what to do about that knowledge involves other factors, such as the economic impact of the Kyoto Protocol, which he says could be “kind of scary” for the United States. Marburger defends the Administration’s recent decision to call for additional global change research following the release of a National Research Council report (Science, 15 June, p. 1979). “There is some uncertainty,” he says, adding, “we do need more information to draft an effective policy.”

Strategic defense issues will present another challenge for Marburger. He characterizes the current policy of mutually assured destruction as “bordering on insanity” and notes that “now we have a president with the courage to change that.” As for ballistic missile defenses, he says that “no one wants to propose a system that doesn’t work. The question is what can be done.”

Old science policy hands say Marburger’s lack of Washington experience could make it difficult for him to penetrate the White House’s tight-knit fraternity. “The question is whether he will be marginalized as an outsider, as a representative of the scientific community,” says one former White House official. “That is the death knell for any adviser.” But Lane says Marburger’s ability to get along with people will serve him well. “It's all about people there,” says Lane. “No amount of rational argument and well–reasoned memos replace creating trust.”

Marburger’s Senate confirmation as director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy may not come until fall, but one Administration official predicts it will prove “a cake walk.” That may be too late, however, for him to put his stamp on the 2003 budget proposal, which is already in the works.

Marburger says he was impressed during his Oval Office meeting by the president’s willingness to listen and his “acute grasp of the fundamentals.” The nominee adds that he did not insist on any “formal access” to Bush, but that he is satisfied he’ll be able to work closely with the president and his team. The challenge for Marburger will be to maintain the detachment he advocates while making an impact on the White House’s rough-and-tumble politics.