

Darwin Day in America



How our **politics** and **culture** have been
dehumanized in the name of **science**

John G. West

UPDATED WITH
A NEW CHAPTER
ON THE RISE OF
"TOTALITARIAN
SCIENCE"

SAMPLE EXCERPT

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*How Our Politics and Culture Have Been
Dehumanized in the Name of Science*

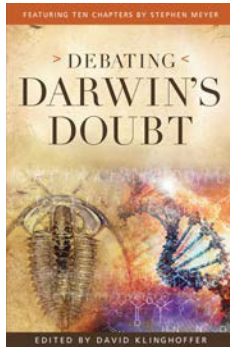
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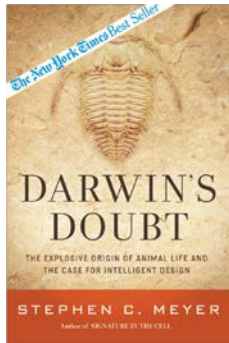
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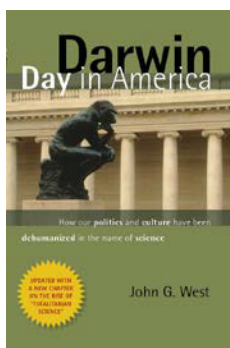
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John West tells the disturbing story of scientific expertise run amuck, exposing how an ideological interpretation of Darwinian biology and reductionist science have been used to degrade American culture and fuel a relentless march from democracy to technocracy in criminal justice, welfare, business, education, and bioethics.

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Afterword to the Paperback Edition: Scientism in the Age of Obama— and Beyond

Darwin Day in America was first published in the fall of 2007. A year later, the United States elected Barack Obama as president. Obama's election may have proved to be a watershed in the ongoing debate over science, scientism, and American society.

Obama began invoking the authority of science right from the start, promising during his first inaugural address to "restore science to its rightful place."¹ He left unstated precisely what the rightful place of science was, but a few months later he elaborated in a speech to the National Academy of Sciences.

"Under my administration, the days of science taking a back seat to ideology are over," he announced to applause. "... To undermine scientific integrity is to undermine our democracy." Obama pledged to the scientists "a new effort to ensure that federal policies are based on the best and most unbiased scientific information." Declaring that "science forces us to reckon with the truth as best as we can ascertain it," he noted that some of the truths revealed by science "fill us with awe," while "others force us to question long-held views." Near the end of his address, as if it were an afterthought, Obama acknowledged that "science can't answer every question. . . . Science cannot supplant our ethics or our values, our principles or our faith." Nevertheless, "science can inform those things and help put those values . . . to work—to feed a child, or to heal the sick, to be good stewards of this Earth."²

In the years that followed, the Obama administration claimed for itself the mantle of scientific authority like no other presidency in American history. Administration officials regularly sought to communicate the imprimatur of science. In 2009 the White House hosted 150 medical doctors for a carefully staged photo-op as the president advocated his proposed overhaul of health insurance. Doctors were told to wear white lab coats for the event, presumably to lend an aura of scientific credibility for the attending media. Extra lab coats were even handed out to those who ignored the dress code.³

Notwithstanding President Obama's pledge to make "scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology," his administration's actions often sent a different message.

Prophet of the Apocalypse

Even before taking the oath of office, Obama announced his selection of a scientist named John Holdren to lead the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. It was a strange choice if the administration truly aimed to keep ideology from interfering with science.

Without question, Holdren had a distinguished scientific résumé. A physicist as well as a professor of environmental policy at Harvard, he was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and past president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. At the same time, he had a lengthy history of ideological activism in the name of science. In particular, he was a past collaborator with population-control zealot Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb* (1968), which one critic has called (not without some justification) "the most spectacularly wrong book ever written."⁴ Insisting that "the battle to feed all of humanity is over," Ehrlich had predicted a rising world death rate and mass starvation of "hundreds of millions of people" by the 1970s.⁵ He was wrong on both counts (and many others).⁶

Ehrlich was a classic doomsayer, continually using science to predict that the Earth's destruction was right around the corner. Holdren had been one of his comrades-in-arms, coauthoring articles and books that predicted the demise of civilization if humanity did not make radical changes. In a book of readings Holdren and Ehrlich edited together titled *Global Ecology* (1971), they warned of catastrophic climate change. But the climate change they worried about most in 1971 was not global warming; it was global cooling. Conceding that warming would eventually become a problem, they worried that pollution could instigate a new global ice age well before then. Even worse, they announced, this new ice age, by adding

weight to the Antarctic ice cap, “could generate a tidal wave of proportions unprecedented in recorded history.”⁷

A decade later, Holdren was still predicting climate catastrophe, but now it was because “carbon-dioxide climate-induced famines could kill as many as a billion people before the year 2020.”⁸ By the turn of the new century, Holdren was supplying help to former vice president Al Gore in the creation of the now widely discredited documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (which Holdren later insisted was “scientifically solid”).⁹

Along with his regular prophecies of doom, Holdren promoted various authoritarian proposals in the name of science. In 1977 he coauthored the book *Ecoscience* with Ehrlich and Ehrlich’s wife. Warning of a coming population catastrophe, the book seemed to recommend compulsory population control as the solution. The authors emphasized that “counting on either a spontaneous demographic transition or on voluntary family planning programs . . . to reduce population growth and thereby ensure successful development would . . . be a serious mistake.”¹⁰ They also praised the success of China’s harsh population-control policies (while denying that China’s policies were actually coercive).¹¹ Criticizing the “pronatalist bias” of U.S. income tax laws that “implicitly encouraged marriage and childbearing,” Holdren and the Ehrlichs proposed discouraging marriages by imposing “high marriage fees” and discouraging new children by raising “taxes on luxury baby goods and toys.” They also declared that “social pressures on both men and women to marry and have children must be removed.” Holdren and his coauthors had little patience for those who believed that family size should be none of the government’s business: “The number of children in a family is a matter of profound public concern. The law regulates other highly personal matters. For example, no one may lawfully have more than one spouse at a time. Why should the law not be able to prevent a person from having more than two children?”¹²

Holdren and the Ehrlichs proposed transferring political power from America’s democratically elected leaders to what they called a “Planetary Regime,” an international technocracy that would “control the development, administration, conservation, and distribution of all natural resources, renewable or nonrenewable, at least insofar as international implications exist. . . . The Regime might also be a logical central agency for regulating all international trade . . . including all food on the international market.” The new world government could “be given responsibility for determining the optimum population for the world and for each region and for arbitrating various countries’ shares within their regional limits.” The authors didn’t spell out how the “Planetary Regime” would enforce population limits, but in another part of their book they suggested the creation of “an armed international organization, a global analogue of a police force.”¹³

Holdren's history of end-of-the-world predictions and coercive utopianism provided a foretaste of his approach as the Obama administration's top science adviser.

Critics accused Holdren of employing scare tactics and going beyond the scientific evidence to promote climate-change initiatives as head of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. He became embroiled in controversy because he highlighted recent extreme cold weather, droughts, and wildfires as evidence of the growing impact of global warming. As even some global warming advocates conceded, those claims were scientifically suspect. During the winter of 2014, for example, Holdren released a short video hyping the purported link between warming and cold weather.¹⁴ A few weeks later, five climatologists responded in the journal *Science*: "As climate scientists, we share the prevailing view in our community that human-induced global warming is happening. . . . But we consider it unlikely that those consequences will include more frigid winters."¹⁵

Later in 2014, environmental studies professor Roger Pielke at the University of Colorado at Boulder tweeted citations to studies that contradicted Holdren's claims about links between global warming and droughts.¹⁶ A political progressive who accepted the idea of human-caused global warming, Pielke was nevertheless a stickler for following what the evidence said. His contrarianism earned him abuse from Holdren and his defenders,¹⁷ but Pielke was unrepentant, ultimately responding in the liberal magazine the *New Republic*: "Exaggerations by advocates of climate action, like those of science advisor Holdren, undermine that trust when they go beyond what the science is telling us. Efforts to quash mainstream, legitimate voices will further undermine that trust."¹⁸

In August of that year, Holdren tried to capitalize on wildfires blazing throughout the western United States by producing a YouTube video that connected wildfires to climate change. Titled "It Only Takes Three Minutes to See Why We Must Act on Climate Change," the video, according to the White House, was intended to show "how climate change is making America's wildfires more dangerous and why we must act now."¹⁹

Unfortunately for Holdren, three new studies published during the same year by different researchers argued that wildfires were not more severe today than they were in the past. "If we use the historical baseline as a point in time for comparison, then we have not seen a measurable increase in the size or the severity of fires," one of the researchers reported. "In fact, what we have seen is actually a deficit in forest fires compared to what early settlers were dealing with when they came through this area."²⁰ Not only that, but the 2014 wildfire season turned out to be significantly less damaging than the average season, with almost 50 percent fewer acres burned than the yearly average from 2004 to 2013.²¹

Scientism Unchained

John Holdren was not the only member of the Obama administration to make questionable scientific claims to further political goals or to justify various forms of coercive utopianism. Government coercion extended all the way into school lunchrooms. First Lady Michelle Obama became the administration's point person for a dramatic revamp of school lunch menus and food aid to the poor, all done under the banner of "sound science."

Stories soon began to circulate of students and local school district officials protesting the unintended consequences of the new regulations.²² Photos of unappetizing meals prepared under the new standards spread across the Internet, including a student-produced YouTube video, "We Are Hungry," that ended up being viewed more than 1.4 million times.²³ The administration responded by impugning those who disagreed with its efforts as the enemies of science.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Mrs. Obama argued that "the initiatives we undertake are evidence-based, and we rely on the most current science. Research indicated that kids needed less sugar, salt and fat in their diets, so we revamped school lunch menus accordingly." She also attacked Congress for attempting to "override science" by considering a bill that would restore white potatoes to the list of foods poor women were allowed to purchase with funds from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.²⁴

The science behind Mrs. Obama's claims about potatoes was disputed,²⁵ but even if the new dietary standards were based on "sound science," the Obama administration's apparent belief that science alone should determine what everyone in the nation could eat was classic scientism. Public policy is largely about reconciling competing goods, and attaining an ideal calorie count dictated by a government scientist is surely not the only human good. Other goods might include enjoying appetizing food, freely determining one's own diet according to one's own wishes, exercising local control of school menus, and maintaining the flexibility to tailor menus to a diversity of students, including athletes, teenage mothers, and others who need more calories.²⁶ The administration's if-we-impose-it-they-will-eat-it approach wasn't exactly a rousing success. According to government auditors, almost 1.1 million fewer students ate school lunches during the 2012-13 school year compared with the previous year.²⁷

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) displayed even more hubris and insularity when it refused demands from Congress to disclose the scientific data the agency had used to establish sweeping new air pollution standards. Congress wanted the data released so that independent

experts could evaluate whether the EPA's standards were justified. Yet for more than a year, EPA officials stonewalled.²⁸ When Congress continued to press the issue, EPA head Gina McCarthy unleashed a furious attack in a speech before the National Academy of Sciences. Lauding science as "our professor and our protector" as well as "our North Star," McCarthy denounced those seeking more transparency. "Those critics are playing a dangerous game by discrediting the sound science our families and our businesses depend on every day," McCarthy warned. Complaining that "our science seems to be under constant assault by a small—but vocal—group of critics," McCarthy claimed that the controversy over the EPA's secrecy was really "about challenging the credibility of world-renowned scientists and institutions like Harvard University and the American Cancer Society."²⁹ In other words, the government's scientists were so superior that their conclusions ought to be accepted without questioning.

McCarthy justified the EPA's secrecy as an effort to "protect confidential personal health data from those who are not qualified to analyze it—and won't agree to protect it." The privacy issue was a red herring. Congress already had made clear that it did not object to personal information being removed or protected.³⁰ One suspects that the real sticking point for McCarthy was her condescending attitude that outside experts who might disagree with the EPA "are not qualified to analyze" the scientific data. McCarthy ended petulantly: "If EPA is being accused of 'secret science' because we rely on real scientists to conduct research, and independent scientists to peer review it, and scientists who've spent a lifetime studying the science to reproduce it—then so be it!"³¹ McCarthy's sweeping assertion that government scientists and experts should be above the norms of democratic accountability was breathtaking.

Congress eventually issued a subpoena to get the EPA to release the data, but even then, more months of stonewalling ensued. Finally the EPA supplied some but not all of the data. The agency conceded that the data supplied were "not sufficient" to allow independent researchers "to replicate the analyses in the epidemiological studies" the EPA had relied on.³²

Even more disturbing than the administration's lack of transparency was its recurring use of "science" as a trump card to override both ethical concerns and religious liberty. This could be seen early on when it overturned the Bush administration's ban on federal funding for some kinds of embryonic stem-cell research.³³ Embryonic stem-cell research (as opposed to adult stem-cell research) can involve the destruction of human embryos, making the practice ethically problematic for a significant number of people.³⁴ Compelling taxpayers to fund the objectionable research intensified the ethical objections. But the Obama administration seemed oblivious to the larger ramifications of its new policy. In its view, advancing the cause

of science was more important than accommodating the ethical objections of a significant portion of the nation's citizenry.

An especially egregious case of the administration's use of science to trump ethics involved its mandate on employers to cover contraceptives and potentially abortion-inducing drugs in their health-care plans.³⁵ According to the administration, the mandate was required by good science. "Scientists have abundant evidence that birth control has significant health benefits for women," declared Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius.³⁶ Science supports contraception; thus employers (including many religious employers) ought to be compelled to provide it, including drugs that may induce abortions. QED.

Just how far some administration officials were willing to take the idea that science should override ethical concerns became apparent with the disclosure of a multiyear experiment funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) involving more than 1,300 premature infants. As part of the experiment, premature infants were randomly assigned to receive higher or lower levels of oxygen. Those receiving lower levels of oxygen were more likely to die, while those receiving higher levels of oxygen suffered serious eye damage that could lead to blindness. Parents were not informed of the possible increased risk of death for infants enrolled in the study. Nor were most of them informed that researchers recalibrated oxygen equipment to generate false readings, thus preventing medical staff from adjusting oxygen levels based on the individual needs of the infants in their care.³⁷

Medical ethicists were appalled. "The word 'unethical' doesn't even begin to describe the egregious and shocking deficiencies in the informed-consent process for this study," said Michael Carome, MD, the director of the Health Research Group at the nonprofit (and politically liberal) group Public Citizen. "Parents of the infants who were enrolled in this study were misled about its purpose. . . . They were misled to believe everything being done was in the 'standard of care' and therefore posed no predictable risk to the babies."³⁸ Carome, who previously served in the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, helped lead the effort to expose the misconduct of researchers and to ensure that the abuses did not recur.

The premature-infant study began during the administration of George W. Bush, but it was Obama administration officials who had to respond to the ethical objections raised. They had a choice: acknowledge there was a problem and fix it, or deny any wrongdoing. They chose the latter option.

Early in 2013 it became clear that the NIH's study was in trouble. The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued an enforcement letter against the

University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) because the researchers on the premature-infant study had failed to obtain adequate informed consent from participants. The OHRP required researchers to submit a plan to fix the problem. Yet only a few months later, the OHRP sent a follow-up letter placing its previous enforcement action on hold.

What had happened in the interim? According to Public Citizen, documents released under the Freedom of Information Act “strongly suggest that NIH launched an aggressive campaign to undermine OHRP’s regulatory authority.”³⁹ Although OHRP was supposed to act as an independent watchdog, NIH officials were allowed to review and rewrite the OHRP’s second compliance letter. A coinvestigator of the study was also allowed to review the draft compliance letter. The full extent of the NIH’s changes to the draft letter could not be ascertained because the Obama administration almost completely redacted the draft versions of the compliance letter it released under the Freedom of Information Act.

“NIH interference in the conduct of an ongoing compliance oversight investigation appears to be unprecedented in the history of OHRP,” wrote Public Citizen. “This interference has seriously compromised the integrity and independence of OHRP’s compliance oversight investigation.”⁴⁰

Public Citizen compared NIH’s efforts to “a pharmaceutical company’s being permitted by . . . the FDA Commissioner’s office to review and edit a warning letter drafted by [the] FDA Office of Scientific Investigations about violations of the FDA’s human subjects protection regulations involving a clinical trial sponsored by that company.” Public Citizen noted that such an occurrence “obviously would be viewed as grossly unacceptable and, presumably, would never be permitted.”⁴¹

Chief among the defenders of the premature-infant study was NIH head Francis Collins. One of Obama’s key science appointees, Collins was known for his work as head of the Human Genome Project as well as for being an outspoken evangelical Christian. Unlike most evangelicals, however, Collins had supported Obama for president in 2008, and many of his views were out of sync with those of other evangelicals.⁴² He was among the NIH officials permitted to review the OHRP’s second compliance letter, and according to Public Citizen, he led a public relations campaign to undermine the OHRP’s initial findings. Citing e-mail messages, Public Citizen accused Collins of seeking to have the second OHRP compliance letter issued the day before an article coauthored by Collins was to be published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* defending the premature-infant study.⁴³ Public Citizen found it “disturbing” that Collins and his coauthors “essentially leaked” to journal editors “the fact that OHRP soon would be issuing a compliance oversight letter to UAB putting on hold all compliance actions related to the investigation.”⁴⁴

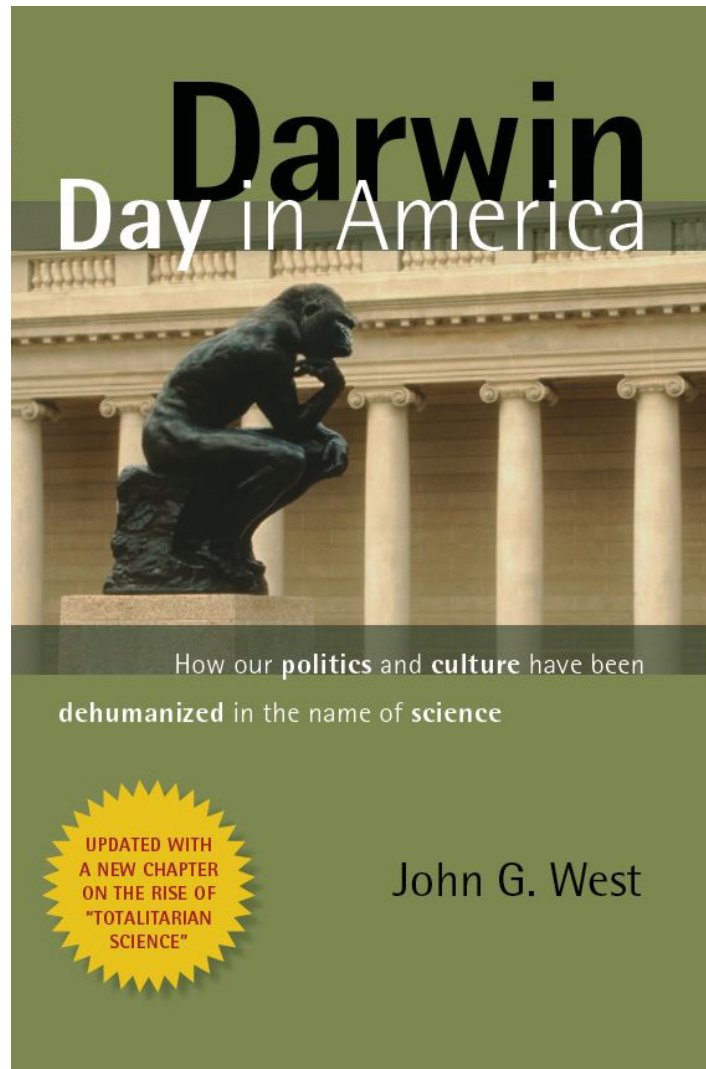
In their public defense of the NIH-funded study, Collins and his coauthors insisted that “investigators had no reason to foresee that infants in one study group would have a higher risk of death than would those in the other group.”⁴⁵ Public Citizen later called that claim “disingenuous,” providing documentation showing that key researchers *were* aware of and discussed the possibility of a differential death rate from lower oxygen levels.⁴⁶ Indeed, one of the purposes of the study was to find out whether there was a differential death rate. In their article, Collins and his coauthors also neglected to disclose that researchers had recalibrated the oxygen equipment to prevent individualized care or that most parents had never been informed of this crucial fact. Science trumped ethics yet again.

The Obama administration’s embrace of scientism was not limited to public policy. In 2014 President Obama ventured into the broader culture wars over science by taping a video introduction to the *Cosmos* television series hosted by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. The creators of the series revealed that they had not asked for Obama’s involvement; the White House had sought them out.⁴⁷ *Cosmos* was a reboot of an earlier series by the same name hosted by agnostic physicist Carl Sagan. Sagan had been criticized for trying to use science to promote metaphysical materialism, and in that sense Tyson’s new series was a worthy heir to Sagan’s original production.⁴⁸ Tyson had previously dismissed God as “an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance,”⁴⁹ and the producers of the new *Cosmos* were known for believing that “religion sucks”⁵⁰ and for warning students: “Stay away from the church. In the battle over science vs. religion, science offers credible evidence for all the serious claims it makes. The church says, ‘Oh, it’s right here in this book, see? The one written by people who thought the sun was magic?’”⁵¹ Given such views, it wasn’t surprising that the new *Cosmos* portrayed religion as the enemy of science, claimed that science shows how life originated through unguided processes, and even compared climate-change skeptics to Nazis.⁵² Immediately after Obama’s videotaped introduction, the 2014 series replayed a classic clip from the original series in which Carl Sagan professes his allegiance to materialism: “The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be.”

The Rise of Totalitarian Science

In many ways, the Obama administration’s scientism reflected the trends documented in the rest of this book, trends that span both political parties and have become ever more pronounced during the past several years. Our culture is witnessing the rise of what could be called totalitarian science—science so totalistic in its outlook that its defenders claim the

Is America entering an era of “totalitarian science”?



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