

Editor

Roy Ockert Jr.
(870) 935-5525

OPINION

A4

Advice for new president

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO

The new president of the United States will be facing challenges not known since the now extinct Soviet Union stunned the world when launching Sputnik more than 50 years ago.

Not only are we facing reduced productivity in Science and Technology (S&T) indicators but an increasing competition from European countries, China and India, as epitomized by the recent achievements of these nations in space exploration. Also, given that most of the funding for S&T comes from the federal government, the increasing deficits will strain our ability to fund scientific endeavors. On top of that, the current financial crisis will also reduce alternative funding sources from the private sector — as made famous in the movie “The Right Stuff,” “No bucks, no Buck Rogers.”

These facts have not been overlooked by 178 organizations representing the interdependent arenas of science, academia and business who are urging the next president to appoint a White House science adviser by Inauguration Day.

The idea is a sound one and reflects the need for effective S&T leadership.

Whoever is selected for the position should be someone with ample experience in diverse fields and capable of providing leadership through independence, commitment and vision. Since S&T is such a vast, complex and changing array of activities, such a person should surround him or herself with the best and brightest of the American minds for advice. In any case partisan ideologies should be discarded when making decisions that need to be informed by our current scientific and technical knowledge.

The president's science adviser should be given a cabinet position to ensure that both the voice of the scientific community is heard while at the very same time the scientific community can be mobilized to face the main challenges dealing with critical areas such as energy independence, climate change, and scientific

SOAPBOX |

literacy. The Manhattan Project is probably the best example in the history of mankind of how a scientific community reached great technical achievements that probably saved the lives of tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of Americans who would have died invading Japan at the end of World War II.

Science education cannot continue to be ignored.

Unfortunately, the United States is at the lower third tier of industrialized nations when it comes to science literacy across the general population. An embarrassing example is that 50 percent of Americans do not even know that the earth revolves around the sun once a year, and significant proportions of them believe in witches, the horoscope or extra-sensory perception. Without scientific literacy we cannot expect our compatriots to either support S&T or influence policy-makers to put together the right decision when it comes to the future of this country. For example the disproportionate funding for research on health issues related to people of advanced age seems to reflect concern among our representatives to Congress for people of their own age rather than actual priorities for the population at large.

It is too bad that the presidential candidates never agreed to have a debate in which the main topic was the future of science and technology in the United States despite calls to that effect.

Therefore, we cannot be entirely sure of the extent and depth of commitment of the candidates in this matter. In any case, a respected and dynamic science adviser who sits in the cabinet meetings can help the next administration with sound and effective science and technology advice.

Dr. Romero is chairman and professor of the Department of Biological Sciences at Arkansas State University.