

The Huffington Post



Peggy Drexler

Political Science

Posted July 18, 2007 | 08:35 PM (EST)

As I think about the entropic countdown to the last hour of the Bush administration, I can't help thinking of Bette Davis' classic line in *All About Eve*: "Fasten your seatbelts, it's going to be a bumpy night."

As the ship of state speeds toward a storm-tossed horizon, the man at the controls has made a convincing two-term case that he has no idea what all those buttons and levers really do. But if your only course is dead ahead, that is not a big problem.

I felt the frightening dimensions of being a captive passenger dropped on like an oxygen mask as I listened to Dr. James Holsinger, the Bush nominee for Surgeon General, make his case for the job by asserting that if anybody tried any political muscle on him, he would walk. He would not, the Doctor assured Congress, let ideology trump science.

But I have to at least question where ideology stops and science starts. When he had the chance to stand up for federal support stem cell research - where one man's ideology ignored the vast weight of medical consensus and a majority of the American people - he ducked the question.

He did a little better on condoms - calling them "one of a number of appropriate means of prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. I would," he added, "talk about others." What makes me think that when he has those conversations, protection and abstinence are not going to get equal billing? What makes me think that no member of the Bush Administration is going to say: "We think abstinence is best. But carry a condom in case that doesn't work out for you."

As for his repudiation of his 1991 opinion that being gay is unhealthy, maybe it's an evolution of opinion. Maybe a Romneyesque ephiphany of convenience.

A few things just don't add up. Some questions, if I may.

The position has been vacant for more than a year. With sixteen months and counting to go in the failed-state that is the Bush administration, why do you even want this job?

The next president is going to make a very public show wiping clean all detritus of the last eight years of war, deceit and incompetence - not to mention the legacies of the most corrosively anti-science White House in modern history. And that, Dr. Holsinger - good man or not - is going to include you.

Also, wake up and smell the futility. Even taken at your word, do you really think you are going to ride in and elevate science above ideology in an administration in which dogma oozes from the cooling vents? This administration was founded by and run for ideologues. It's what they do. Change that? Abandon the staggering rear-guard of an approval rating? Not gonna happen.

Your assurances of independence also follow the inconveniently timed testimony of the last three Surgeon Generals, all of whom said that politics curtailed their ability to do their jobs. The man who held the job until last July, Dr. Richard Carmona, said the administration forbade him to speak of or write about stem cells, emergency contraception, sex education, prison, mental health or global health. Officials, he testified, consistently delayed or tried to "water down" the report that - when finally released last year - argued that brief exposure to second-hand smoke could cause immediate harm.

Your promised focus on childhood obesity is laudable. But given Dr. Carmona's battles, you might think twice about pulling from their diets the refined carbohydrate-packed product of a major contributor.

If you actually get this job, you are going to have to move quickly to show whether you are an independent man of medicine, or the Bush administration's team doctor. Sixteen months, Dr. Holsinger. Tick, tick, tick.