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Speakout: Pre-emptive politics ignore science

By Roger A. Pielke Jr., Special to the News
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Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could accurately predict the future and then take effective actions?

This approach to policy making has been called "pre-emption" by the Bush administration and underlies the national security strategy that led to the war in Iraq and the recently canceled government program on betting on acts of terrorism.

But pre-emption is exclusively neither a Republican approach to policy, nor confined to national security. For example, it is also the stance of choice for environmentalists who seek to pre-empt emerging environmental threats like global warming.

Pre-emption makes a lot of sense when knowledge is certain and there is little political controversy. Examples of pre-emptive successes - among many - are vaccinations, earthquake engineering, and even Social Security, which "pre-empts" poverty among our seniors. Each of these policies is based on certain knowledge and an overwhelming political consensus, two conditions that make up a short recipe for pre-emptive success.

By contrast, pre-emption has little hope for success when knowledge is uncertain and there is intense political conflict. In cases like Iraq or global warming, decisions must be made when the most honest statement about intelligence, scientific or otherwise, is simply, "We don't know for sure." When political conflict over what to do occurs under conditions of uncertainty, a pre-emptive stance creates powerful incentives to politicize information in favor of a predetermined answer. Starting with answers and then looking for supporting information may be an acceptable approach for students in Policy Studies 101, but it has serious consequences when it is the preferred approach of policy makers making consequential decisions.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., recently released a report suggesting that the Bush Administration has systematically shaped scientific information and expert panels in support of its political agenda. Yet the Bush administration is not alone. A conservative advocacy group in Washington has sued the government to suppress what it views as politically motivated reports on climate change originating in the Clinton administration.

Asking political officials from either party to oversee scientific activities makes about as much sense as asking Donald Rumsfeld to edit CIA reports on weapons of mass destruction. This all but guarantees the politicization of information.

Politics is all about reducing choices to a single preferred course of action - war in Iraq, yes or no? Kyoto protocol, yes or no? But for choice to be reduced, there must first be alternatives. When politicized, a pre-emptive approach doesn't need alternatives; it merely needs political victory on a single, predetermined option. And one way that political victory can be achieved is by leaving no room for doubt.

The quest for certainty required by a commitment to pre-emption elevates the role of politics in policy and diminishes the role of information. In situations of profound uncertainty or irreconcilable differences in values, flexible policies that evolve based on public participation and the lessons of experience may make more sense than large scale commitments from which there is little chance to correct mistakes. The

motivations of political advocates may help to explain the turn to pre-emption in situations of uncertainty and



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We risk bad policy when all choices before us are bad ones. For instance, the Kyoto protocol on climate change has its supporters and opponents, but very few are willing to admit that debate over its implementation has considerably more symbolic value than practical effect. The debate over the war on Iraq may have been similarly misguided as better policy options may have been ignored. In both cases, a commitment to pre-emption enables the politicization of intelligence, which then serves as a constraint on options that may be more effective but, for certain ideologues, politically less desirable.

Pre-emption hurts the policy process when it results in a dearth of choice.

Lack of choice also threatens democracy because it elevates politics above policy, and it substitutes consideration of creative policy alternatives with political battle over predetermined positions.

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