

Obama on Science: Hope or Hype?

Written by Jeff Wagg

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There may not be a blog in the world that isn't talking about Obama today. His speech included two important things for our community: nonbelievers and science. While we at the JREF are thrilled that a president actually acknowledged that nonbelievers are welcome in this country, it's his comments on science that we'll look at here.

We have a reason to be happy that Obama mentioned science from the podium, and in a supportive light, but what did he really say?

Remember: Obama's speech was written by a team of writers. He directed them, but he is not solely responsible for these words. Every syllable of this speech was checked for clarity of purpose and meaning. It was an extremely scrutinized eighteen minutes of text.

Obama said:

We will restore science to its rightful place, and wield technology's wonders to raise health care's quality and lower its cost

Interesting wording there. What is science's rightful place? Skeptics might see science as something that should influence all aspects of life. Others might think it's only needed in the laboratory. He could have been very specific there, but chose to leave the wording open-ended.

The next clause seems somewhat unrelated. Science can clearly raise health care's quality, and has done so year after year for hundreds or thousands of years, but can science lower its cost? Possibly, but the real problems with the cost of healthcare aren't science problems, they're bureaucracy problems. That's the domain of politicians, not scientists.

He continued:

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We will harness the Sun and the winds and soil to fuel our cars and run our factories

Ok, solar could be good, there have been some [recent innovations](#) there that could be exploited. Wind power remains problematic, but there is clearly the potential to collect some energy. Bio-fuels (unless by soil he meant coal and oil!) could have some impact, but the [current ethanol situation](#) isn't all clean air and fresh roses. It seems that Obama is saying that we'll explore many options to reduce our oil dependency. That sounds great, but how?

Hopefully, Obama's choice of appointees is a sign that smart, science-minded people will actually have a hand in making policy. [He's asked real scientists](#), some of whom are Nobel laureates, to populate posts that were formerly filled with administrators. And indeed, if you read the article, you can see that they have experience in the very issues he raised in his speech.

Later, Obama said:

We will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat, and roll back the spectre of a warming planet.

I'm not sure how science can be used to lessen the nuclear threat. In fact, what does he mean by that? Science can find a way to split an atom, but deciding what to do with that is up to politicians and other decision makers. The "nuclear threat" cannot be solved by science. Things cannot be unlearned in that way.

As for the warming planet, controversy continues to reign in the skeptic community. If global warming is caused by human activity, it's possible for science to help, but this is no small feat. Affecting the world's climate on purpose, with a goal in mind, is the stuff of science fiction, and likely the kind of science fiction that ends badly. I hope the plan is to study more before we devote massive resources to a problem we may not be able to solve.

In the end, while it's refreshing to hear these issues being brought up by the executive branch, Obama remains unproven. He has inherited the office at an incredibly difficult time, and it

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seems foolish to think that he'll be able to change things quickly.

At the same time, isn't it nice to have a bit of hope for a change?

(Lest the politicos descend, neither I nor the JREF espouse any political party.)