

MAGA's assault on science is an act of grievous self-harm

America will pay the price most of all

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The attacks have been fast and furious. In a matter of months the Trump administration has cancelled thousands of research grants and withheld billions of dollars from scientists. Projects at Harvard and Columbia, among the world's best universities, have been abruptly cut off. A proposed budget measure would slash as much as 50% from America's main research-funding bodies. Because America's technological and scientific prowess is world-beating, the country has long been a magnet for talent. Now some of the world's brightest minds are anxiously looking for the exit.

Why is the administration undermining its own scientific establishment? On May 19th Michael Kratsios, a scientific adviser to President Donald Trump, laid out the logic. Science needs shaking up, he said, because it has become inefficient and sclerotic, and its practitioners have been captured by groupthink, especially on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). You might find that reasonable enough. Look closely at what is happening, though, and the picture is alarming. The assault on science is unfocused and disingenuous. Far from unshackling scientific endeavour, the administration is doing it grievous damage. The consequences will be bad for the world, but America will pay the biggest price of all.

One problem is that actions are less targeted than the administration claims, as our special Science section this week explains. As Mr Trump's officials seek to stamp out DEI, punish universities for incidents of antisemitism and cut overall government spending, science has become collateral damage. A suspicion that scientists are pushing "woke" thinking has led grant-makers to become allergic to words like "trans" and "equity". As a consequence, it is not only inclusive education schemes that are being culled, but an array of orthodox science. Funding has been nixed for studies that seek, say, to assess cancer risk factors by race, or the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases by sex.

The attack on elite universities takes this to an illogical extreme. Because the White House sees colleges as bastions of wokeness and antisemitism, it has withheld funding for research at Harvard and Columbia, no matter in which subject. Overnight, projects on everything from Alzheimer's disease to quantum physics have been stopped. When scientists warn of the harm this does, they risk being seen as part of a scornful anti-MAGA elite that has been protected for too long.

More fundamentally, the claim that Mr Trump will stop groupthink is disingenuous. MAGA reserves a special hatred for public-health and climate researchers, whom it regards as finger-wagging worrywarts determined to suppress Americans' liberties—as they did in lockdowns and school closures during covid-19. The consequence is that spending on vaccine and climate research will be gutted most viciously of all. With the stroke of a pen, officials are trying to impose new rules that tell scientists what areas of inquiry they may pursue and what is off-limits—a shocking step backwards for a republic founded on the freethinking values of the Enlightenment.

Meanwhile, genuine problems with the way science works in America are being neglected. Mr Kratsios is right that there is too much bureaucracy. America's best researchers say they spend two out of five days on form-filling and other administrative tasks, instead of in the lab. Research is becoming more incremental. New ways of funding, such as lotteries, are worth trying. So far, however, the White House has not set out plans to make science work better. Indeed, when scientists are uncertain whether their work will still be funded, or if they take to the courts to challenge arbitrary grant terminations, American science becomes less efficient, not more so.

Congress and the courts may yet act to limit the scale and the scope of these anti-science endeavours. Even so, the damage of the past few months will soon be felt. Savage cuts to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration mean worse weather-forecasting, making it harder for farmers to know when to plant their crops, and for local authorities to prepare for natural disasters. Those to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention will make it harder to monitor, and thus curb, outbreaks of disease. There will also be longer-term harm. Although Mr Trump hopes his tariffs will lure businesses to invest in America, their research spending is unlikely to fill the same gaps as publicly funded basic work, much of which may not be commercialised for years, if ever. As funding is frozen, the danger of a brain drain looms. In the first three months of the year the number of applications for overseas jobs from American scientists rose by a third compared with the same period in 2024; foreign researchers applying to come to America fell by a quarter. The country's reputation for welcoming talent will not be so easily regained.

If the belief that academic freedom is curtailed takes hold, the scientists who remain could self-censor their lines of inquiry for years to come.

The consequences will be felt around the world. America is the planet's biggest backer of public research; it is home to half of all science Nobel laureates and four of the ten best scientific-research universities. The knowledge uncovered by American scientists and resulting innovations such as the internet and mRNA vaccines have been a boon to humanity. When America retreats, everyone is robbed of the fruits of this ingenuity.

It is America, however, that will feel the pain most of all. At the beginning of the 20th century there was no branch of science in which Uncle Sam led the world. At the century's end there was none where it did not. America's triumphs—its economic prowess, and its technological and military might—were interwoven with that scientific success. As America pulls back, it will cede ground to authoritarian China as a scientific superpower, with all the benefits that confers. MAGA's assault on science is not just about DEI, nor is it about universities. It is first and foremost an act of self-harm.