

HISTORY OF SCIENCE

The myth of apolitical science

Denouncing state-controlled research, U.S. investigators advanced the American agenda during the Cold War

By Alex Wellerstein

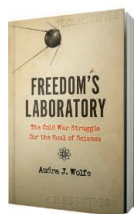
“Science is apolitical” is a deeply political statement: One only feels the need to assert something like this in times when it is a hard case to make. That science exists within a political environment and participates in political activities should not be controversial. But it is, especially in the current moment, when it would be (politically) convenient to have something in our present world that felt devoid of politics. Audra Wolfe’s provocative new book, *Freedom’s Laboratory*, dives into the fascinating history of why asserting the apolitical nature of science became a political priority during another notably politicized period in America’s past: the Cold War.

Wolfe, whose work as a scholar of Cold War science and technology has earned immense respect from other historians of science, approaches this history episodically. The book’s first chapter, for example, goes over the well-trodden ground of the Lysenko affair, in which Mendelian genetics was suppressed in the Soviet Union in the name of a state-sponsored ideological alternative. What makes Wolfe’s account distinct, however, is that her interests are less about what happened in the USSR than about how American scientists mobilized their understanding of what was going on abroad as part of their own propaganda campaigns.

Some scientists resisted making “political” statements, whereas others, such as the Nobel laureate H. J. Muller, thought it was their duty to point out the perversions of science going on behind the Iron Curtain. Such instincts were encouraged by anti-Communist forces in the U.S. government, who saw them as supporting the “American way of life.”

In example after example, Wolfe shows prominent American scientists denouncing the politicization of science while engaging in explicitly political activities. They

did not, she repeatedly emphasizes, see any contradiction in this; they believed that the heavy-handed Soviet approach to science was fundamentally antithetical to the pursuit of truth and did not see their own interactions with government funding as being of the same character at all. As Wolfe puts it, “having convinced themselves of the possibility of apolitical science, they saw little reason to turn away funds that might help them achieve their own, supposed enlightened, goals.”



**Freedom’s Laboratory
The Cold War Struggle
for the Soul of Science**
Audra J. Wolfe
Johns Hopkins
University Press, 2018.
312 pp.

In another chapter, Wolfe describes how the U.S. State Department attempted, without much tangible success, to use “scientific attachés” as a form of cultural diplomacy and intelligence collection. The idea was that American scientists would be stationed abroad, where they would intermingle with scientists in their respective host countries, with the goal of sharing the advantages of the American scientific way of life and observing trends among foreign scientists as a form of intelligence collection. These programs were nearly subverted by the more rabid anti-Communist agencies in the United States, who could not understand why State Department scientists were spending so much time interacting with foreign scientists of dubious character.

In Wolfe’s account, American efforts to mobilize science as a cultural weapon in the

Cold War were frequently ineffectual and uncoordinated. The value of science as a form of “soft power” never seems to have been quite as obvious to the U.S. government as its value in building the weapon systems that underwrite “hard power.” And American activities and political life during the Cold War were compromised and constrained in their own ways, leaving potential evangelists for democracy open to charges of hypocrisy or even put under threat by the agents of McCarthyism.

For present-day historians of science, the fact that scientists and their work are intimately intertwined with political forces is neither scandalous nor surprising. Indeed, it is essentially an article of faith that science will be influenced by the context in which it is done, just as it influences that context back again. Science is a social activity and always carries some mark of that, however subtle. As Wolfe notes, even something as seemingly innocuous as secondary science education “teaches students not only facts but also what sorts of facts are worth knowing.”

In her epilogue, Wolfe asks, “Who wins, and who loses, when scientists claim a unique ability to operate free from politics?” Herein lies both the rub and the controversy: In the present day, nearly everything appears to have been politicized. The instinct to say that scientific truth cares not for the whims of political parties is understandable. But is it true?

Wolfe’s history suggests, as good histories of science frequently do, that the answer is a bit more complex than it first appears. Her goal is not to undermine the authority of science; if anything, it is to encourage scientists and their supporters to think more subtly about the ways that they leverage the political uses of claims to apolitical science. ■

10.1126/science.aav4900

PODCAST

The Story of Soy

Christine M. Du Bois
Reaktion Books, 2018. 277 pp.



Soybeans are the most widely grown and traded oilseeds.

What do Buddhist missionaries, Henry Ford, and Greenpeace all have in common? As Christine Du Bois reveals in her new book, the answer is the humble soybean. This week on the *Science* podcast, Du Bois discusses soy’s vital role in human history, from its ancient domestication and ascendance as an agricultural staple to its emerging role as a promising biofuel component.

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The reviewer is at the College of Arts and Letters,
Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA.
Email: awellers@stevens.edu

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