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ASTRONOMY

Astronomy: NASA chief must arise from shadow of politics, defend scientific efforts

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The head of NASA, Michael Griffin, has been in the news recently, not because of a breakthrough in space science, but for the down-to-earth subject of global warming.

Part of

NASA's mission is to monitor Earth's climate. Last month, the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change issued a report, based in part on NASA's data, that predicted drastic consequences if global warming is not stopped.

NASA's budget for satellites to monitor the oceans and the atmosphere has been cut back in recent years, because of a shift of funding for the International Space Station and other manned missions. The chairman of the House Science and Technology Committee, Rep. Bart Gordon, D-Tenn., issued a statement criticizing this budget shift.

In an interview on National Public Radio, Griffin said, "I have no doubt that a trend of global warming exists," but he then stunned the scientific community by saying that he was unsure whether global warming was "a problem we should wrestle with."

I encourage readers to go to the NPR Web site to hear Griffin's comments in full. What struck me about this interview was not whether Griffin is uninformed, as others have contended, but that he intends to follow without question the priorities set by politicians.

So here is my question: Should the priorities of NASA be set by scientists or by administrators? It is important to continue monitoring Earth's climate, so that data is available to help guide scientific analysis. The director of NASA could show leadership and stand up for the scientific community, but will he?

From my own experience, I know that the National Science Foundation and the Department of Energy set priorities guided by advice from panels of distinguished scientists. This process, along with good leadership, leads to sound scientific decisions on funding priorities.

Griffin is in the hot seat on the issue of global warming. Other issues might not get as much press, but many astronomers are concerned that NASA's scientific mission is taking a back seat to the manned missions. Let's hope that NASA will find the leadership it sorely needs.

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