

Brave new world

The inauguration of President Obama signals hope — and hope for science.

On 20 January 2009, Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States of America. A Democrat, following eight years of Republican administration, and the first African-American to hold the office, Obama has the weight of expectation on his shoulders.

On the day of his inauguration, watched by a crowd of as many as two million people in front of the Capitol and hundreds of millions more around the world, President Obama was sworn in and delivered an address that spoke of challenge and responsibility, duties and unpleasant decisions. He inherits a nation at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and suffering the tightening grip of recession.

But the speech also underlined the message of change promoted during Obama's campaign for the presidency, and bristled with the determination to tackle head-on the thorny problems that had been, at best, ignored and, at worst, denied by the previous administration. Obama began his term of office with a huge approval rating, in excess of 80% (whereas George W. Bush left with the lowest approval rating of any outgoing president). According to the *New York Times*, a similar fraction of the American populace feels 'optimistic' about the next four years.

Scientists may count themselves among the optimists. Positive notes on the role of science were struck by both camps during last year's campaign for the presidency, culminating in the promise by then President-elect Obama to listen to scientists "especially when it is inconvenient". The seal on that promise seemed set when he announced, in December 2008, the positioning across his administration of a strong, highly qualified cadre of scientists.

Physicist John Holdren was named Assistant to the President for Science and Technology. A Harvard professor, director of a science, technology and public policy programme and former president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Holdren is expert in the issues of energy, environment and nuclear proliferation.



And he will be listened to. His advice — sound, scientific advice — will clearly be needed to underpin Obama's inauguration promise to "work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat and roll back the spectre of a warming planet". So much time has already been lost on the issue of climate change, and there is further urgency to ensure that the USA plays its proper part in the next round of UN climate talks, taking place in Copenhagen in December 2009.

"We will restore science to its rightful place"

Climate change and energy concerns seem also to have guided Obama's choice for the head of the Department of Energy: Steven Chu, director of Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and Nobel Prize winner in physics, for the technique of laser cooling that led to the creation of the first Bose-Einstein condensate. Chu's research in recent years has been directed to the development of alternative energy sources, and at the confirmation hearing for his nomination last month, Chu was described as "uniquely poised" for the post.

Elsewhere, there are other talented scientists in evidence: geneticists Harold Varmus (a former director of the National Institutes of Health) and Eric Lander will co-chair the President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology, and marine biologist Jane Lubchenco will head the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Then, days ahead of the inauguration, the Democrats launched a multi-billion-dollar stimulus package in the House of Representatives — one that would pump tens of billions of dollars into basic research but also, explicitly, into lab infrastructure. It is a proposed cash boost, not long-term funding, and it remains to be seen how the bill will fare in Congress this month. But it is a mark of the new administration's confidence in America's scientists, and in science as a source of solutions to global problems.

The burgeoning positivity for science was captured exquisitely in those magic words from the inaugural address: "We will restore science to its rightful place". That and the other inaugural promises are now to be acted on, and it will take a brave president indeed. □