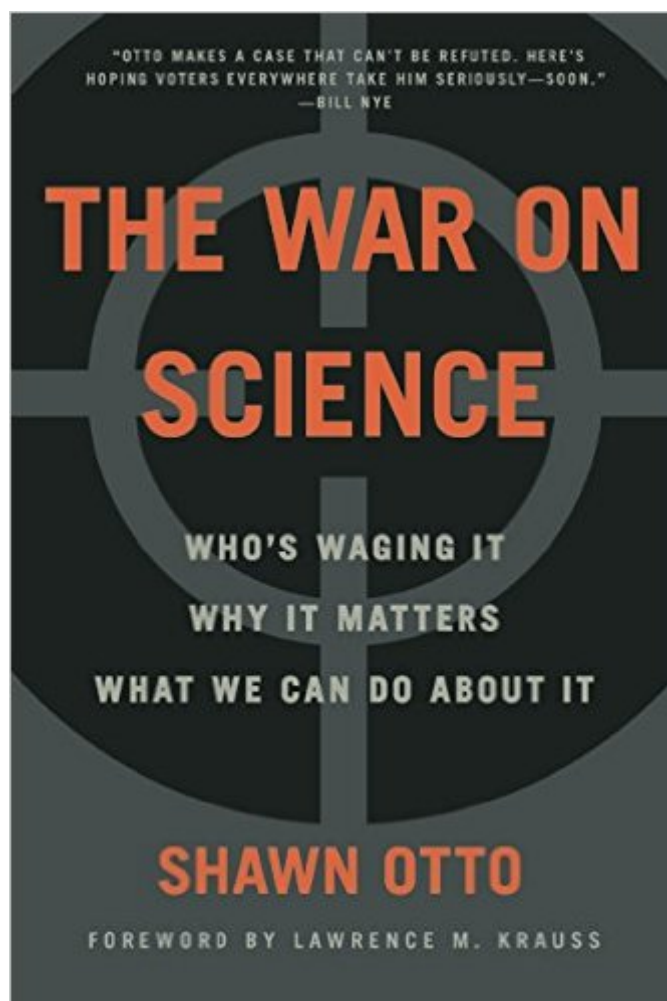


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The War On Science: Who's Waging It, Why It Matters, What We Can Do About It



Synopsis

"Wherever the people are well informed," Thomas Jefferson wrote, "they can be trusted with their own government." But what happens when they are not? In every issue of modern society--from climate change to vaccinations, transportation to technology, health care to defense--we are in the midst of an unprecedented expansion of scientific progress and a simultaneous expansion of danger. At the very time we need them most, scientists and the idea of objective knowledge are being bombarded by a vast, well-funded, three-part war on science: the identity politics war on science, the ideological war on science, and the industrial war on science. The result is an unprecedented erosion of thought in Western democracies as voters, policymakers, and justices actively ignore the evidence from science, leaving major policy decisions to be based more on the demands of the most strident voices. Shawn Lawrence Otto's provocative new book investigates the historical, social, philosophical, political, and emotional reasons for why and how evidence-based politics are in decline and authoritarian politics are once again on the rise, and offers a vision, an argument, and some compelling solutions to bring us to our collective senses, before it's too late.

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• The War on Science: Who's Waging It, Why It Matters, and What We Can Do About It • should be viewed as the definitive book on science denialism in America and belongs on the bookshelves of anyone in government or politics seeking to make public policy decisions that require sufficient knowledge, understanding and appreciation of science, including medicine and

technology. This is no mere sequel to Otto's earlier "and still terrific" "Fool Me Twice: Fighting the Assault on Science in America". Instead, what Otto does here is to cover both the history and philosophy behind science denialism, doing an exemplary job in describing how the scientific method actually works, and in praising Karl Popper's philosophy with regards to testing scientific hypotheses. He also reminds us of science's importance "especially with regards to basic research" in promoting democratic values, which even scientifically-literate Founding Fathers like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson understood and appreciated, realizing that they were creating a democratic republic that would promote the growth of scientific knowledge, with that knowledge used to further our country's economic success; a point which others, most notably Kenneth R. Miller and Niles Eldredge, have emphasized in their own noteworthy books on evolution denialism, by pointing out that failing to deter and to defeat science denialists "in this case, Intelligent Design creationists and other, so-called "scientific" creationists" has grave implications for ensuring America's future economic and intellectual success as a preeminent global economic, intellectual and cultural power.

How is it that humans invented science, used science for all sorts of improvements (and, admittedly, a number of unintended negative consequences), and then came to new ways of developing policy and practice that hobble the use of this important cultural and social resource? Shawn Otto's book is a careful and detailed scholarly examination of this question. I struggled for a time with whether or not I should make the following statement about *The War on Science*, because I want this statement to be taken in a positive way, though it might be seen as a criticism. Otto's book is similar to, and at the level of, an excellent PhD thesis. I very quickly add, however, that since this is the work of a very talented writer and communicator, it does not read like a PhD thesis. It reads like a page turner. But the substance of the book is truly scholarly, contributes new thinking, and is abundantly and clearly documented and backed up. I can't think of too many books that do all of this. In 2012, Otto posed the conundrum, "It is hard to know exactly when it became acceptable for U.S. politicians to be antiscience." One could ask the same question about leaders of industry. The answer may be fairly obvious. This became acceptable the moment the interests being served by those politicians shifted from the populous to the smaller subset of owners and investors of business and industry. The money trail, which one is often advised to follow to find a truth, leads pretty directly to that answer. A harder question is, how did large portions of the academic world also decide to be anti-science? For this, one needs to take a more fine grained cultural approach, looking at self interest in the context of scholarship. How does religion fit in here?

The War on Science is a must read book for scientists and anyone even remotely interested in science or policy or politics or decision-making or life. Yes, that means you. The book is actually much more than the title suggests. Shawn Otto (one of the founders of ScienceDebate.org) delves deep into the history of science, but also in the psychological, sociological, political, educational, and religious histories and their interactions with science. He points out that the early leaders of this nation were promoters of science. George Washington said "There is nothing which can better deserve our patronage than the promotion of Science and Literature." Jefferson heavily promoted science during his presidency and noted as he was leaving office that "Science is my passion, politics my duty." Great Republican presidents such as Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and William McKinley all emphasized the importance of science and technology. The author notes that Republicans were once the party of progressive optimism and tolerance, of environmentalism and finance, of rationalism and national parks. Only recently have Republicans turned against science. [But Democrats have their anti-science as well, which he discusses] The reasons for this turn toward antiscience are discussed in great detail. Otto digs into the history of religious intolerance for science that contradicts scripture, most notably by the excommunication of Galileo (who, ironically, was devoutly religious), but also with many other examples ranging through history to today. He examines the interplay of antiscience and "freedom," including how fear of annihilation from Cold War/nuclear weapons led to the "live for today" attitude of the 1960s.

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