
Scientists “Ask Not”

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Author(s)

Jennifer Pearl

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It's been almost 60 years since President John F. Kennedy called on America's youth to pick up the torch and enter public service on behalf of our nation and the world. At the time, nearly 80 percent of the country trusted government. Today, only 17 percent of Americans say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (three percent) or “most of the time (14 percent), according to a [Pew Research Center survey \(https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/\)](https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/).

In the best of times or the worst of times, using science in decision-making can offer a beacon of hope. July 2019 was the hottest month ever recorded, the permafrost is melting, and fires are raging in the Amazon. Measles, a disease that had been essentially eliminated in our country, has had resurgent outbreaks in recent years. Racism, sexism and white nationalism are rearing their ugly

heads. The challenges we face are big and complicated, but they are not insurmountable. Scientific knowledge is key to both understanding these issues and to finding tenable solutions.

It has never been a more critical time to bring together our nation's best collective minds to solve hard problems.

This month, more than 270 top scientists and engineers are coming to Washington to serve in federal offices as part of the [Science & Technology Policy Fellowships \(http://www.aaas.org/stpf\)](http://www.aaas.org/stpf) (STPF) program managed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and its partner societies. Because their value is well known and well demonstrated, the demand for these fellows from Congress and federal agencies greatly exceeds the supply. As they step up to the plate and help find a path forward on diverse problems faced by our country, these scientists will be heeding President Kennedy's call to "ask not."

These fellows are scientists and engineers who support efforts in both houses of Congress and in 20 executive branch agencies, bringing fresh ideas and data-driven sensibility to solving problems. A recent [interim report \(https://www.inspire2serve.gov/NCOS%20Interim%20Report.pdf\)](https://www.inspire2serve.gov/NCOS%20Interim%20Report.pdf) from the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service speaks to the importance in engaging vibrant minds in federal work, and these fellows are bringing many opportunities to bring new ideas into policymaking. The [White House's most recent National Security Strategy \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf) stresses the need for technical expertise in government and to "create easier paths for the flow of scientists, engineers and technologists into and out of public service."

Last year, Science & Technology Policy Fellow Anita Burgos, serving in Senator Tina Smith's office, contributed to the bipartisan Emergency Access to Insulin Act of 2019 to control skyrocketing insulin prices. Fellow Tracey-Ann Wellington coordinated policy for international information sharing related to post-detonation nuclear forensics at the Department of State. Fellow Salah Issa synthesized artificial intelligence efforts within the Department of Agriculture, protecting our nation's food supply.

And here's the thing about science: you can question it, but you can't outrun it. If farmers experience climate-related alterations to their growing season and water resources, food supplies will be affected. If the technical systems that underlie national infrastructure are not secure, we are all prone to cyber attacks. And hurricanes go where they will, regardless of the message that is transmitted about their paths.

An era of hard problems is exactly the time for the best solutions. That time is now, and the latest generation of scientists and engineers are up to the challenge.

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