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EDITORIAL

Hunting Witches

Saturday, July 23, 2005; Page A16

"THIS IS HIGHLY usual," declared a spokesman for the House Energy and Commerce Committee when asked this week whether the request by committee Chairman Joe Barton (R-Tex.) for information from three climate scientists was out of the ordinary. He and his boss are alone in that view. Many scientists and some of Mr. Barton's Republican colleagues say they were stunned by the manner in which the committee, whose chairman rejects the existence of climate change, demanded personal and private information last month from researchers whose work supports a contrary conclusion. The scientists, co-authors of an influential 1999 study showing a dramatic increase in global warming over the past millennium, were told to hand over not only raw data but personal financial information, information on grants received and distributed, and computer codes.

Rep. Sherwood L. Boehlert (R-N.Y.), chairman of the House Science Committee, has called the investigation "misguided and illegitimate." Raymond S. Bradley of the University of Massachusetts, one of the targets, calls it "intrusive, far-reaching and intimidating." Alan I. Leshner, chief executive of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said that although scientists "are used to answering really hard questions," in his 22 years as a government scientist he never heard of a similar inquiry, which he suspects could "have a chilling effect on the willingness of people to work in areas that are politically relevant."

Mr. Barton's attempt to dismiss all this as turf-battling on the part of Mr. Boehlert, like his spokesman's claim that such demands for data are normal, is disingenuous. While the Energy and Commerce Committee does sometimes ask for raw data when it looks at regulatory decisions or particular government technology purchases, there is no precedent for congressional intervention in a scientific debate. As Mr. Bradley pointed out in his response to Mr. Barton, scientific progress is incremental: "We publish a paper, and others may point out why its conclusions or methods might be wrong. We publish the results of additional studies . . . as time goes on robust results generally become accepted." Science moves forward following these "well-established procedures," and not through the intervention of a congressional committee that is partial to one side of the argument.

If Mr. Barton wants to discuss the science of climate change, there are many accepted ways to do so. He could ask for a report from the Congressional Research Service or the National Academy of Sciences. He could hold a hearing. He could

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even read all of the literature himself. There are hundreds of studies in addition to the single one that he has fixated on. But to pretend that he is going to learn something useful by requesting extensive data on 15th-century tree rings is ludicrous; to pretend that it is "normal" to demand decades worth of unrelated financial information from scientists who are not suspected of fraud is outrageous. The only conceivable purpose of these letters is harassment. This bizarre episode deserves much wider condemnation from congressional leaders.

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