

As you've heard, I will retire this year after 35 years at Research!America, so I thought this would be the time for a confession.

I was wrong, and you were right.

For all those years, I argued that scientists needed to become public advocates for science, that is, advocates for science in the general life of the nation, our public life, the life we share with one another day to day. I argued that scientists should be public advocates in the formal sense of writing letters, speaking at public forums, or meeting with elected and appointed officials.

But I also argued that scientists can be very powerful advocates in informal ways. Science has--for far too long--stood apart from our daily life. It has been aloof, abstract, remote. And because it is remote, it can become intimidating, even frightening. I argued that scientists could advocate for science just by not being remote. Scientists could advocate by being visible, identifying as scientists, in coffee shops, soccer fields, and for the person sitting next to you on your next flight.

For scientists to be visible in local communities is to normalize science, to bring it within reach, **to make it feel real**. This is profound advocacy, and I argued that science needed this advocacy.

Well, I was wrong, and you were right. I wasn't wrong about advocacy. For scientists to make themselves visible is indeed advocacy of great power. But I was wrong that science *needed* this visibility. At least until now, science hasn't needed it. Science kept on being pretty well supported by public funds, by industry and philanthropy--sometimes *very* well supported--even without the kind of advocacy that I had pleaded for.

To be sure, I did manage to persuade a few scientists to become public advocates, and I'm so grateful for their work. But only a few. Mostly, science has resisted the call to advocacy. But science did not wither. Science hasn't needed the advocacy of scientists because others took on the task. Hundreds, thousands, of people set themselves to speak on behalf of science, and they did so with passion, conviction, and great skill.

I was and am honored at Research!America to work with some truly great advocates for science. Mary Lasker. Paul Rogers. Jack Whitehead. John Whitehead. Susan Whitehead. John Edward Porter. Ann Lurie. Herb Pardes. Bill Novelli. Isadore Rosenfield. Gordon Gund. Roy Blunt. Lou Sullivan. George Vradenberg. Jed Manocherian. The Staglin Family. Many, many more--some of whom are sitting among us today.

Thanks to such advocates, science could thrive even though scientists themselves largely kept apart from advocacy.

But that was then. And this is now. I *was* wrong. But I'm not wrong now.

The Prime Minister of Canada's recent speech at Davos has been so often cited that it has become a cliché, but I've never been afraid of clichés, so here comes Mark Carney at you, one more time. In speaking of the world order in 2026 he said: "This is a rupture, not a transition."

I say the same to you about science and politics in 2026: "This is a rupture, not a transition."

Carney used language that was meant to shock, and it did. He said that for 80 years, the world has believed in a rules-based international order, but that this belief was a fiction. A comforting fiction, a reassuring fiction, but a fiction nonetheless. 2026, he said, marks "the end of a pleasant fiction, and the beginning of a harsh reality."

I say the same to you today about science and politics: 2026 is the end of 80 years of a pleasant fiction, and the beginning of a harsh reality.

Of course, I do not mean that *science* is a fiction. Scientists throughout the world, and US scientists in particular, have done astonishing, incredible work. Literally: incredible. The achievements of science have blasted through the boundaries of what, not long ago, we would never have thought possible. And these achievements have contributed to the public good in ways that are beyond measurement.

No, of course the achievements of science are no fiction.

The pleasant fiction all these years has been that the achievements of science have had nothing to do with politics.

Science has long told itself the fiction that the work of science has no connection to politics and that scientists themselves should keep clear of politics.

Everyone knew, of course, that science depended on politics for its lifeblood, but it was pleasant to believe that the link between science and politics was no more than the decisions made behind closed doors, by a handful of power brokers, perhaps influenced by those I named a few minutes ago. Meanwhile, the link between science and politics could be minimized, sterilized, ignored.

But this is a rupture, not a transition. This is the beginning of a harsh reality.

The link between science and politics was never so nominal as the fiction presented, but the past doesn't matter now. The harsh reality of today is that the link between science and politics has exploded into our daily lives because politics itself has exploded into our lives.

What has changed forever is that day-to-day politics has leapt from our TV screens into the palms of our hands. What has changed forever is that politics is happening whenever someone opens a news feed, or a social media thread, or starts doomscrolling. What has changed forever is that politics in this country happens not a million times a day, but many billions of times each day.

It used to be that politics was an ordinary part of our everyday lives. Today, politics is an ordinary part of our every-*second* lives.

And whether science likes it or not, when politics became an every-second phenomenon, so did the link between politics and science. When politics leapt into the palm of our hands, it dragged science with it. Every second of every day, science is in the middle of the nation's combustible politics. Whether it is praised or damned, whether it is understood or falsified, whether it is supported or weaponized, science is now inseparable from politics. Every second. Billions of times a day.

Like it or not, every-second politics has changed the game for science. The pleasant fiction of the past allowed scientists to remain as spectators to the nation's politics. The political game was being played on the field, but scientists said to each other: "Don't get in that game, don't go on that field, stay on the sidelines." Or better still, stay in the stands. Or even better yet, scientists said to each other, "Walk past the stadium of politics, avert your eyes, and pretend that there is nothing for you to do there."

Well, the pleasant fiction is over.

The harsh reality is that in the age of every-second politics science is on the political field every second, which means that science has a choice.

Science can choose to be a political player. Or it will be a political football.

Let me be clear. The solution to every-second politics is not to *join* the doomscrolling. I am not suggesting that scientists ought to try to transform doomscrolling into explanations of immunology or introductory textbooks on biochemistry.

The solution to every-second politics on the internet is for science to become part of people's every-second life.

Today, science is paying the price of having distanced itself from everyday life. Precisely because science separated itself from everyday life, people have nothing in their *life* to counter what they read. It is folly to think that people should counter today's every-second politics with the abstract education in science that they received in school. For most people that education is not merely forgotten, it was never real, it was never concrete. Science in school is a million miles away from the actual lives that people actually live.

And yet I repeat: the solution to every-second politics is that science must now become part of people's every-second life.

How? Scientists.

Scientists need to become advocates in just the sense of making science real to the public, making it concrete, making it human. Today, to thrive in the world of every-second politics, science needs to be part of our shared life, our common life, the life we live in coffee shops and soccer fields and holiday dinner tables. And only *scientists* can make this happen.

I was wrong before, but I'm not wrong now. The answer to every-second politics is for scientists to be advocates. The answer to doomscrolling is for scientists to be visible in town halls, coffee shops, and soccer fields. The answer to invisibility is more scientists like those who organized the McClintock letters. The answer to the weaponizing of science is for scientists, *scientists*, to turn to that person next to you on the plane who asked what you do, and say: "I work for you."

I'll be there with you. I may be leaving Research!America but I'm not leaving the playing field. The reality we face may be harsh, but it is by no means discouraging. On the contrary. We can make that reality amazing. Imagine the possibilities. Imagine what can happen when advocacy by scientists leads this country to see science not as abstract, but as real; science not as intimidating, but as human; science not as remote, but as centered at the very core of the life that we share together. A life of achieving aspirations we share, together.

Imagine the power for science that this advocacy will unleash.

I can't wait.

Thank you.

Mary Woolley
10 March 2026