

Roth: When power attacks science

By [Jim Roth](#), Director and Chair of the Firm's Clean Energy Practice Group. This column was [originally published in The Journal Record](#) on July 10, 2017.



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When power attacks science

What do Okemah, Oklahoma, today's EPA and Galileo have in common? Life lessons about the resilience of science across the history of humankind, even when those in power would attack it for political gain. Allow me to explain.

The Woody Guthrie Folk Festival, in Guthrie's hometown of Okemah, is set for another music celebration July 12- 16, as it's always scheduled around his July 14 birthday. Begun in 1998, WoodyFest continues to attract world-renowned folk and rock music performers, including an artist who caught my ear

named Ellis Paul. Paul attended that first year and continues to visit each year. His music is a folk-pop style that can be provocative and his lyrics have stayed with me since I first heard them, including his song Did Galileo Pray?

The song tells the story of Galileo Galilei, the famed 17th-century astronomer attacked by religious leaders for his role in the scientific revolution of the day, including telescopic confirmation of the phases of Venus, the moons of Jupiter and sunspots. He was tried in the Roman Inquisition in 1615 and found “vehemently suspect of heresy” for contradicting scriptures, and he was forced to spend the rest of his life under house arrest.

Singer Ellis Paul’s lyrics ask:

When he looked into a starry sky upon Jupiter, with its cold moons making their weary rounds.

Did he know that the Pope would claim that he ran with Lucifer and a prison cell could be where he’d lay his head down?

Was he wearing a thorny crown? When he plotted the motion of planets, was Mercury in retrograde?

But he found the truth when a lie was what was demanded. When the judges asked him pointedly he was a’ trembling that day.

Chorus:

Did Galileo pray?

And the song wraps with:

Don’t shoot the messenger, when the postman brings you truth today.

I think of this song often for its ironical question of a scientist accused of heresy because his scientifically proven research refuted the positions of those in power at the time.

Lately, I've thought of this song daily as I read headlines about the current Trump Environmental Protection Agency purging scientists and going after those whose careers have focused on climate science and its proven research.

The EPA is apparently now being stacked with climate-change skeptics and just this month EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt announced, to a lobbying group of coal industry executives no less, that he was convening a "red team-blue team" exercise to challenge mainstream climate science and the enormous consensus that exists across the globe.

So the agency charged with protecting our country's environment and public health is now pushing its own inquisition and bragging about it to the most polluting industry known to man.

And sadly while efforts to undermine scientific consensus, or at least to delay the response to the dangers of a changing climate, for some rehashed debate about whose fault it is, science just marches on. Proven scientific theories contain facts, which are observations that have been repeatedly confirmed and are, for all practical purposes, accepted as true. And simply put, science doesn't care if you believe it or not.

But to deny it only risks the lives of those people who politicians have sworn an oath to protect. Guthrie's famed guitar, which strummed his populist, pro-people messages, had an inscription that read: "This machine kills fascists." Today it might state that science outlives them too.

So please always remember, this Land is your Land, this Land is my Land ... and This Land was made for you and me. We should all protect it as the only land we have, no matter how those in power choose to attack it for political gain.

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