ASTRONAUTS FOR AMERICA

INSTITUTIONAL NORM: EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

"I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy"
George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796

BACKGROUND

In this tenth briefing in our series, "America, We Have a Problem," we look at the institutional norm, Evidence-Based Decision-Making. That is, the discipline of grounding policy, operational, and institutional choices in the best available data, rigorous analysis, and transparent reasoning rather than in ideology or political convenience. In complex, high-consequence environments, decisions that ignore or suppress evidence predictably lead to preventable failures. The principle is not that data will always deliver a single obvious answer, but that the process of gathering, weighing, and honestly communicating evidence must be disciplined and protected from political interference. Across American history, government agencies have been charged by statute with producing and acting on science and other reliable evidence, whether in public health, environmental regulation, aerospace safety, financial oversight, or national security. When that charge is honored, outcomes improve. When it is overridden, people are harmed, and international and public trust are eroded.

SELECTED HISTORICAL THREATS

- **1870-1920:** As the population moved from rural to urban, food-borne illness became a major public health issue. The Pure Food and Drugs Act (1906) barred adulterated and misbranded food and drugs from interstate commerce.
- **1986:** The Challenger loss, according to the Rogers Commission, was caused in part when NASA's management culture suppressed technical findings from Morton Thiokol, the solid rocket booster contractor. "The project managers for the various elements of the Shuttle program felt more accountable to their center management than to the Shuttle program organization." In response, NASA moved to a "host center" vs. "lead center" model by moving program management to Headquarters and taking the center directors out of the programmatic chain of command. The centers were given independent technical and safety oversight roles.
- **2008:** A global banking collapse occurred despite regulators having ample warning and authority but using neither to stop it (according to the FCIC's January 2011 report). Congress created the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission in 2009 and passed Dodd-Frank in 2010, creating the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to help prevent future occurrences.
- **2022**: The House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis report found political appointees sought to influence 19 CDC scientific reports and altered or delayed five.

SELECTED RECENT THREATS

- Between September 2024 and February 2026, the Partnership for Public Service reports the federal science workforce, which includes health, land and food-safety agencies, fell by nearly 118,000 following administration "efficiency" cuts. A separate Science analysis counted 10,109 doctoral-trained scientists leaving in 2025.
- In June 2025, HHS removed all 17 members of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and named replacements, only one of whom had conventional vaccine-policy credentials. In March 2026 a federal judge stayed the new appointments and all the committee's votes as likely violations of the Federal Advisory Committee Act.
- In 2025, Bureau of Labor Statistics data collection was cut back and its Commissioner fired; the nominee to replace her withdrew against Republican Senate resistance, and the Labor Department's Inspector General opened an audit.
- In 2026, NSF began removing about 900 instruments from its Ocean Observatories Initiative, ending measurements of ocean temperature, salinity, oxygen and acidity. NSF reversed the decision in June 2026 after bipartisan congressional pushback.
- In May 2025, Executive Order 14303, "Restoring Gold Standard Science," rescinded the federal scientific integrity policy and put scientific-integrity processes under a senior political appointee. In August, Executive Order 14332, "Improving Oversight of Federal Grantmaking," gave a political appointee review of discretionary grants and made peer review advisory.

Astronauts For America Focus: As NASA astronauts, our missions and our lives depended on the integrity of data and the courage to act on it. We know firsthand that suppressing inconvenient findings or substituting baseless assertion for rigorous analysis is not merely intellectually dishonest, it is dangerous. We are not constitutional scholars, but we know how to defer to subject matter experts when analyzing complex sociotechnical failures. We draw upon reliable sources: court decisions, congressional records, peer-reviewed scholarship and news reporting rather than commentary or opinion. We at Astronauts For America remember the quote over the door to Houston's Mission Control, "***In God we trust; all others bring data.***" We will publish findings and recommendations in our series of briefings, "Failure Is Not an Option," calling on accountable officials and citizens to "course correct," and ensure that truth trumps politics in all decisions.

"***Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.***"
John Adams, closing argument in defense of the British soldiers tried for the Boston massacre, 1770

Appeal to Our Crewmates: We need your help. Please use the "Contact Us" feature on our website to make suggestions about what we can do to help our democracy strengthen its commitment to that critical institutional norm, **Evidence-Based Decision-Making.**