

## Who Should Speak at the People's House?

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The US president-elect hopes to make scientific lectures part of the White House social calendar. We ask *BioTechniques'* readers: Who should be asked to speak, and why?

Long, long ago, my father told me a story about the dinner President John F. Kennedy hosted for 49 American Nobel Prize winners in 1962. "I think," Kennedy told his guests, "this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House—with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone." Unlike some of the tales we heard at our parents' knee, this one seems to square with the historical record.

The anecdote came to mind after watching an exchange between host Tom Brokaw and President-elect Barack Obama on the Dec. 7 edition of NBC News' "Meet the Press." It was just a fleeting comment near the close of the hour-long interview, and passed so quickly I almost missed it, sandwiched as it was between two higher-profile items: the nomination of Gen. Eric Shinseki to head the Veterans Administration and Mr. Obama's pledge that, despite his own difficulty quitting smoking, he will see that no-smoking rules are obeyed in his White House.

Here is an edited transcript:

Brokaw: ...Let me ask you as we conclude this program this morning about whether you and Michelle have had any discussions about the impact that you're going to have on this country in other ways besides international and domestic policies... Who are the kinds of artists that you would like to bring to the White House?

Obama: ...[W]e have thought about this because part of what we want to do is to open up the White House and... remind people...this is the people's house. There is an incredible bully pulpit to be used when it comes to, for example, education. Yes, we're going to have an education policy. Yes, we're going to be putting more money into school construction. But, ultimately, we want to talk about parents reading to their kids. We want to invite kids from local schools into the White House. When it comes to science, elevating science once again, and having lectures in

the White House where people are talking about traveling to the stars or breaking down atoms, inspiring our youth to get a sense of what discovery is all about. Thinking about the diversity of our culture and, and inviting jazz musicians and classical musicians and poetry readings in the White House so that, once again, we appreciate this incredible tapestry that's America... [O]ur art and our culture, our science...that's the essence of what makes America special...and we want to project that as much as possible in the White House.

Scientific lectures at the White House. If I used exclamation points, I'd use one here. How long has it been since we thought of a president actually embracing and enjoying the challenge of science? Are we really facing a time when American leadership once again accepts scientific inquiry as an integral part of our culture, and not an enemy of it?

With regard to whom, exactly, Mr. Obama should invite to the White House, we have some obvious choices. The new president should hear Rita Colwell's (University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins University) "Climate, Oceans, Infectious Disease, and Human Health: The Saga of Cholera." [We heard her in October at Columbia University's annual Presidential Lecture, and wrote about it for the online component of our December 2008 issue (1). He and his administration would also benefit from visits by any of the participants in the extraordinary 2008 James L. Waters Symposium, including Leroy Hood (Institute for Systems Biology, Seattle, WA) talking about P4 medicine (P4 stands for "predictive, preventive, personalized, and participatory"), George Church (Harvard University) discussing the means and applications of high-speed, low-cost individual sequencing, or Richard Wilson (Washington University in St. Louis) explaining crop plant genomics or the history of the human genome.

Better yet, we would like to hear our readers' suggestions for the White House lectures. So please post your suggestions on the "To the Editor" section at the bottom of the *BioTechniques* Molecular Biology Forums page (2). If you're shy, write directly to douglas.mccormick@informausa.com. Tell us whom the People of the United States should invite to lecture at the People's House, what we should ask them to talk about, and why the President should listen.

### REFERENCES

1. McCormick, D. 2008. Washed in a Microbial Sea. *BioTechniques* Vol. 45, No. 6: (Dec. 2008), [www.biotechniques.com](http://www.biotechniques.com)
2. "To the Editor," [molecularbiology.forums.biotechniques.com](http://molecularbiology.forums.biotechniques.com).