



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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NTS under new leadership

NTS president John Thomas has resigned after leading the group since 1987. NTS extends a special thanks to John for his untiring efforts and leadership over the past years. John has made a substantial contribution to the organization during his tenure.

The following officers were elected for 1990:

President: John Blanton
Vice President: Joe Voelkering
Secretary/Treasurer: Mark Meyer
Newsletter: Tony Dousette

Board Members:
John Blanton
Joe Voelkering
Mark Meyer
Tony Dousette
Ron Hastings

It was later learned that then vice president, Mel Zemek, had passed away the week prior to the January meeting. Joe Voelkering was elected vice president to fill the vacancy at the February board meeting. Mel was one of the most astute and well-liked members of the NTS, and his absence will be sorely felt.

Tony Dousette has asked for a replacement as editor of the newsletter. Keith Blanton, brother of president John Blanton, has agreed to join the NTS and to perform the editing tasks on his personal computer. Keith will edit the newsletter starting with the May-June edition.

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NTS member spreads the word

Our speaker's program has been active recently. In January, John Thomas spoke at a luncheon meeting of the American Business Club in Irving, and a week later to a Parents Without Partners meeting, a total of some 75 persons. On February 7, Thomas appeared on the "About Town" interview program on Telecable of Richardson, discussing psychic powers with host Jo Shannon. On February 14, Thomas spoke to Prof. Ray Eve's class on science and society at UTA.

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NTS loses a friend

NTS Vice-president and board member Mel Zemek died January 19 after a brief illness. Mel's death came as a shock to all of us who had worked with him over the past two years. Mel's observations on science and critical inquiry were founded on a long and varied career. An electrical engineer by profession, Mel flew with the RAF in the Battle of Britain, and after the war worked for several years as a stage magician in New York. He was a radio amateur, as well as a member of many civic and fraternal organizations, ranging from Mensa to the Boneheads. His advice and counsel will be sorely missed.

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Only a theory

Part 2

by Scott Faust

(Part 1 of this article in the last issue discussed the Texas textbook proclamation introduced in January of 1989 and the flap over its requirement for the coverage of evolution.)

The Board Acts on Proclamation 66

After February's public hearing on Proclamation 66, a committee of the Texas Education Agency (TEA), chaired by Commissioner of Education Kirby, redrafted the document, incorporating changes requested by the State Board of Education (SBE). At the time it was probably expected that this version would pass unamended. The high intensity fundamentalist lobbying which followed the public hearing proved effective, however, and last minute changes would be made by the SBE.

On Friday, March 10, the day preceding final action on Proclamation 66, the board's various committees met. The six member Committee on Students unanimously accepted the revised proclamation, but with a number of modifications and additions to the TEA draft. As far as I can determine, these had been worked out either that day or the day before. Board member Will Davis of Austin appears to have been the principle architect. Committee on Students chair Geraldine Miller told me that he had distributed a letter containing possible modifications among Board members that Thursday.¹ Davis claims that others contributed to the language added.²

Don Patton was in Austin again for the March meeting. According to one newspaper report, "he said he recommended the change to committee chairwoman Geraldine Miller."³ Miller acknowledges that she discussed the proclamation with Patton, but only in general terms.¹ Patton told me that he discussed the proclamation with a number of board members,

and that Jon Buell (of the Dallas-based Foundation for Thought and Ethics⁴) had done likewise.⁵ Speaking in Oklahoma in September, Patton referred to the "textbook committee" (by which he meant the Committee on Students), claiming that, "those six are creationists," and that the board in general was strongly predisposed to respond favorably to creationist demands. "With a little bit of backing [them] up and help," he said, "we were able to help them write the guidelines."⁶ Patton's claims about the number of creationists on the board are clearly exaggerated-I hope!

However, this all may have been the items in Biology I and II which had read, "scientific evidence of evolution," emerged from the Committee on Students reading, "scientific evidence of evolution and *other reliable scientific theories to the contrary.*"

The authors of this language, whoever they may have been, probably considered it to be carefully crafted, but the handful of scientists and science education activists present went ape-so to speak. The next day Will Davis (the probable instigator of the debacle) proposed an amendment before the full Board to remove, "to the contrary," and add, ", if any. " This passed, making the final language, "scientific evidence of evolution and other reliable scientific theories, if any." After the meeting both anti-evolution activists and their opponents claimed victory. Publishers who were there, however, thought that the Committee on Students' language could have required them to present unscientific information in their texts, but that the amendment removed that obligation.⁷

This is speculation on my part, but it seems that at least some board members treated the evolution controversy as a purely political issue. Others may have been misled into believing that there really were non-evolutionary theories with scientific standing. Some may be anti-evolutionists by religious conviction. Of course, many members may have simply been caught off guard and confused by the eleventh-hour changes. Sadly, no member, so far as I know, forthrightly opposed the anti-evolution language on grounds of academic integrity. Member Carolyn Crawford, however, did warn the board that their makeshift actions had not resolved the issue, and that they had best become better informed before textbook adoptions in 1990.⁷

A Familiar Pattern

Although not the only last minute revision, the "other reliable scientific theories" language received all of the attention in the press. By dropping "to the contrary" and adding "if any," the board could claim that they were not passing judgment on the status of evolution, but deferring to the expertise of textbook authors and leaving publishers more options. Other revisions introduced by the Committee on Students, and which were not amended by the board, tell a different story.

First, though, some of the changes which had been made as a result of the public hearings were good (the last minute changes being uniformly anti-science). "Human reproduction and fertilization" was added in one place, for example, and a reference to the use of "evolutionary affinities" in the classification of organisms in another. "Darwin's theory of evolution" was added to a section on "important scientific discoveries and theories of the past," etc.

Other of the TEA drafted changes were stilted. Item 1.4 under "Scientific methods" in the content section of Biology I was amended to read, "scientific theories and laws *based on existing evidence as well as new evidence.*"

Parallel language, in process skills, was further modified by the Committee on Students' revision to produce section 6.3, below. It is found in both Biology I and II:

6. Drawing logical inference, predicting outcomes, and forming generalized statements.

6.1 predicting the outcome of manipulating a variable

6.2 deducing a biological hypothesis from experimental data

6.3 examining *alternative scientific evidence and ideas to test, modify, verify, or refute scientific theories*

What students should be expected to examine is sound, available, and relevant evidence, but this should hardly require

specification. Much space could be consumed considering what "alternative evidence" might mean. Probably the phrase is intentionally ambiguous, so that creationists can envision the spurious or irrelevant arguments on "creation science" as comprising "alternative evidence."

Quibbles about the wording of this section are, however, of secondary concern. Although 6.3 sounds as if it would concern all scientific theories, it does not. It reads like a general principle, but was neither applied nor intended that way. In fact, the content sections of Biology I and II are sprinkled with parenthetical directives to "see 6.3 under Process Skills" -the only such cross referencing in the document. Below are all of the elements to which "see 6.3" is appended in the final proclamation:

2.6 Darwin's theory of evolution

4.2 theory of chemical origin of life

8.2 theory of inheritance

8.7 recombinant DNA and genetic engineering

9.2 scientific evidence of evolution and other reliable scientific theories, if any

6. Principles of genetics

7.2 scientific evidence of evolution and other reliable...

An incomplete list of theories which do not have the "see 6.3" tag would include: cell theory, the biogenetic law, vaccination, DNA structure, population dynamics, ecological succession, photosynthesis, cellular respiration, DNA replication, protein synthesis, enzyme activity, systems of classification and phylogeny (oops, missed one!), etc., etc., etc. The content sections are all but wholly composed of theories. Only with those which might offend a fundamentalist, however, are we directed to "see 6.3."

In Elementary Science the pattern is, if possible, even more unambiguous. Here language corresponding to that of 6.3 appears in the content section (rather than under process skills), linked directly to the "objectionable scientific theories." Italics identify the additions, which occur only in these two items of a very extensive content outline:

1.5 inherited and environmental influences upon living things *including the examination of alternative scientific evidence and ideas for scientific theories* of evolution, adaptation, and extinction

2.2 the history of the earth and the universe including *the examination of alternative scientific evidence and ideas for scientific theories* of origin, evolution, geologic time, etc.

There is also evidence external to the text of Proclamation 66 shedding light on the intended purpose of 6.3.

After it was adopted, Mel Gabler wrote to Commissioner of Education Kirby, petitioning to have language from the proclamation, particularly 6.3, added to Chapter 75 of the Texas Administrative Code (Title 19), which is the State Curriculum. The following is from a September 9 letter from Kirby to the SBE concerning the Gabler petition. Emphasis is added:

In the case of Biology I and Biology II, the curriculum review process did not recommend any changes in the essential elements [Chapter 75 Curriculum].... *The changes* in the essential elements (process skills) in *Proclamation 66* referred to by Mr. Gabler *were made by the board to accommodate changes in content related to the topic of evolution*, not through the curriculum review process. However, because the changes in the essential elements are important to the teaching of evolution, I am of the opinion that they should be added to board rule.⁸

Because the Chapter 75 Curriculum focuses on process skills, neither the "see 6.3" parenthetical references nor the "other reliable scientific theories" language is involved here. Thus Kirby recognizes that 6.3 is directed to evolution,

even in isolation from the language in the content sections of the Proclamation.

The Gablers responded to the final proclamation with characteristic bombast. They produced a six page flyer in which they thanked followers for their calls and letters to board members, claiming that "God almost visibly intervened as the Texas State Board of Education... set final standards for treatment of evolution..."⁹ Among other lines of evidence for Divine Intervention, they call attention to the linkage of 6.3 to evolution by enumerating the see 6.3" references just as I have done above. I caught up with the Gablers at the Bryan College-Bible Science Association Conference on Biblical Origins in Dayton, Tennessee last summer. Mel seemed genuinely puzzled by my suggestion that a statement like 6.3 ought to apply to theories other than the ones he opposes.

Final Comments on Proclamation 66

By now the parallels between Proclamation 66 and the defunct anti-evolution general content requirements described in the first part of this article should be obvious. Both gratuitously single out evolution (and, in Proclamation 66, other conclusions of science offensive to fundamentalists) for qualifications not applied to other scientific theories. In both cases decidedly sectarian considerations can be inferred.

Still, evolution is in the proclamation, and publishers will not be required, as almost happened, to include spurious anti-evolution arguments in their texts.

One reason for this success is probably the history outlined previously. Texas has repeatedly suffered embarrassment and criticism due to the SBE's handling of evolution and other controversial academic issues. This has to weigh with the current board-the first elected board to replace an appointed one instituted in large part because of this very history.

Commissioner of Education Kirby was also a key factor. The Commissioner is the administrator of the TEA and acts as secretary to the SBE. Kirby seems to have been the one who made the decision to include evolution and convinced the board to go along. The professional science staff at the TEA has, one would assume, long wanted to produce sound and comprehensive textbook requirements, but this is the first time the Commissioner has even agreed with this position, let alone provided leadership. The Commissioner, by the way, is appointed by the SBE, and confirmed by the state senate.

But the SBE did cave in to fundamentalist pressure to an alarming degree. They essentially put the onus for maintaining academic integrity regarding evolution into the hands of textbook publishers, at the same time sending signals that it may not sell well in Texas, the largest single high school textbook market. Although publishers will probably act in a responsible manner-most want to produce good books-they have been known to practice self-censorship in the past.¹⁰ Since it's uneconomical to produce multiple versions of a text this can, and has, affected books used nationwide.

We shouldn't be entirely without sympathy for the SBE, however. Anti-evolutionists have honed a slick rhetoric over the decades. It has the advantage over genuine science of being designed for the layperson, and it has fooled many intelligent people. And, as mentioned before, the anti-evolution language may have taken some, possibly most, board members by surprise. Recall, also, that board members have been lobbied by hundreds of people who *really do* believe that evolution is, fundamentally a satanic lie, perpetuated by an amorphous yet nearly universal conspiracy (or professionally imposed brain washing) among scientists to withhold and cover up the evidence which would expose its fatal flaws.¹¹ These are people who have often wedded the most fundamental articles of their faith to a particular set of untenable claims about earth history. These beliefs can produce an emotional distress in their adherents that most board members, being human, will want to respond to helpfully.

The sanctity of individual beliefs, convictions and conclusions should, indeed, be inviolable. Whether they are "reasonable" or not makes no difference. Teachers, for example, cannot properly compel belief from students, only understanding. They should do even this with respect and sensitivity, both to the student's convictions, and to the nature, compass and limitations of their discipline. None of this would make it legitimate, however, for the teacher to revise the content of his subject to fit a student's beliefs-or even his own. It is likewise illegitimate for an agency like the SBE to ask publishers to misrepresent the findings of scholarship and research conducted within the proper domain of science. This insults science, religion and students, and can only perpetuate the problem it is intended to address.

Proclamation 67

While advocates of state of the art science education can be grateful for the progress made with Proclamation 66, it is depressing (and foreboding?) to find these improvements enmeshed in the attenuated but familiar anti-evolutionism, misconception of theory, etc., of the past. The SBE now has an opportunity to demonstrate that it can escape this pattern with the proclamation introduced in January of this year.

Proclamation 67 includes Applied Biology, Life Science (grades 7 and 8), Geology, and Physics I and II, as well as several non-science courses. Applied Biology is the new term for Introductory Biology, which was dropped from Proclamation 66. Geology was in Proclamation 65, where, as in the current draft of Proclamation 67, requirements demanded a thorough coverage of historical geology—a requirement that none of the texts then submitted fulfilled. The State Textbook Committee nixed them all.¹² In the past, texts slighting historical geology would have been the preferred article in Texas! Evolution is again covered in the biology subjects. The schedule for consideration and implementation of Proclamation 67 is essentially the same, one year added, as that outlined previously for Proclamation 66.

The 6.3 language does reappear in Proclamation 67. Although the wording is still not ideal, "alternative" has been removed from the phrase "examining alternative scientific evidence," and there is nothing like the "see 6.3" references. The 6.3 language is used in Physics and II, even though these do not discuss cosmic evolution, stellar evolution, or other subjects likely to vex fundamentalists. "And other theories, if any" has been dropped from "scientific evidence of evolution." About the only remnant of the anti-evolution language from Proclamation 66 is the use of the plural, as in "scientific theories of evolution." (There remains a tendency to use the word "theory" more often in regard to evolution. This is significant in light of the general content requirement that "theories shall be clearly distinguished from fact." It may be the 22nd century, however, before we see the theory *and* fact of evolution "clearly distinguished" in a Texas proclamation!)

The flap over Proclamation 66 has shown that the kind of academic standards which should be a given in science education are under attack, and that the SBE is, at least potentially, capable of infecting textbook standards with any form of neuroticism that is sufficiently popular. Because its February draft corrects most of the problems we found in the final version of Proclamation 66, it will be instructive to see how the SBE deals with the new proclamation. The public hearing on February 8 went well, but so did last year's. Readers are encouraged to contact the board member from their district and share their opinion before final action on Proclamation 67 in the second week of March.

As to this year's textbook adoptions under Proclamation 66, at least two organizations defending scholarly standards will be reviewing texts: The Houston-based Broader Perspectives, Inc., and a coalition currently being set up, Texas for Excellence in Science Textbooks ~ Some scientists will also be reviewing texts individually. People for the American Way has reviewed texts in the past, but their involvement is much less now, especially since their Texas executive director, Mike Hudson, has moved out of state. Anyone wishing to learn more about textbook selections, or to become involved in some way, should contact NTS member Ronnie Hastings.¹³

Notes

1. Telephone conversation with Miller, 9/1/89.
2. Davis told this to geologist/textbook activist Stephen Schafersman who I phoned on 12/13/89.
3. *The Dallas Morning News*, "Panel OKs inclusion of evolution in texts," March 11, 1989.
4. Jon Buell commented on the proclamation in *The Dallas Morning News*, "Viewpoints," March 10, 1989. FTE has recently published a supplementary biology text, *Of Pandas and People*, designed for the public high schools. It is reviewed in the Jan/Feb newsletter of the National Center for Science Education. Creationists tried, and narrowly failed, to get it on the approved list in Alabama. Texas does not approve supplements, but local school districts can buy them. The book can be purchased for \$17.43 from Houghton Publishing [Publishers of the Cotton Gin and Oil Mill Press], P.O. Box 180218, Dallas, TX 75218.

5. Telephone conversation with Patton, 12/23/89.

6. Patton's comments were transcribed by Frank Sonleitner of Oklahoma.

7. Austin American-Statesman, "Compromise reached on text guidelines," March 12, 1989.

8. The letter is in the agenda for the SBE's September 1989 meeting (p. V-9).

9. The MEL GABLERS. "Parents, Teachers and Students Win Big in Austin," T-715. It is also noted that "theory of evolution" was changed to "theories" as the Gablers had requested.

10. See references in footnotes 1, 4 and 9 from the first part of this article.

11. A couple of quotes by Mel Gabler from the radio show mentioned earlier will be illustrative:

"If the evolutionists knew they had a case, they wouldn't care how much evidence we put into the schools. But they know they don't have it, and that's why they're afraid of it [and so keep it out by dishonest means]."

"There is a practice in science that is observed everywhere but evolution-physics, chemistry-that is anytime you discuss a theory you give the pro and the con, but not evolution, it's suddenly censored." Norma: "They can't afford to have the evidence against." *Acts and Facts*, Vol.18, No. 11, Nov., 1989.

12. Thanks may be due in part to textbook reviews submitted to the committee by geologist Stephen Schafersman and Elizabeth Judge's organization, Broader Perspectives, Inc.

13. A checklist for citizen involvement in textbook selection:

1) Identify the SBE member from your district and make contact.

2) Vote for board members in primaries and general elections. Also watch non-partisan local school board races. (There are at least two organizations devoted to supporting fundamentalist candidates for these offices: Citizens for Excellence in Education, and the American Parents Association.)

3) Write to the TEA, Textbook Division, W.B. Travis Bldg., 1701 N. Congress Ave., Austin 78701. Request to be put on the "list of interested persons" to receive information about textbook adoptions.

4) Locate the Regional Education Service Center in your district. When new texts arrive you can review them there. Identify the State Textbook Committee member from your area and share your critiques.

5) Follow through on the local level. Find out who selects texts for the local schools and help them identify the best books from the adopted list.

6) Consider joining an organization concerned with these issues. The National Center for Science Education (an AAAS affiliate) is the only national level "pro-evolution" organization specializing in the creation/evolution controversy. NCSE; P.O. Box 9477; Berkeley, CA 94709. A \$15 membership includes a 24 page bi-monthly newsletter, book discounts, etc.

7) Be paranoid. Assume that anti-evolutionists are doing all of the above in vastly greater numbers than we, "the good guys," are. They probably are.

8) Look for the supplementary text *Pandas and People* (or similar material) to turn up at your local school. (See footnote 4.)

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