



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Numbers racket

Most Texans either love or hate the new Texas state lottery.

By Mike Sullivan

Religious organizations hate it. They fear that the money spent on tickets will be diverted from their collection plates each week. Many Texans see it as a regressive tax targeted toward the poor and uneducated who can least afford it, to be used as a Band-Aid by spineless Texas politicians to temporarily avoid dealing with the state's deeper financial troubles.

Governor Ann Richards loves it. The new lottery is expected to vacuum another \$400 million or so out of Texans' pockets over the next two years, siphoning already-taxed money from the private sector back to the inefficient machinery of government, before our legislators are forced to face reality and call for a state income tax. Hundreds of newly-hired lottery commission employees love it as well, since the new bureaucracy means more cushy lifetime-employment state jobs. Advertising firms love it, along with convenience stores and gas stations, since they all get to cash in on the lottery hype.

Another group of people who definitely look at the new Texas lottery as a growth industry are astrologers, psychics, numerologists and other sundry and assorted seers. They have wasted no time in offering their services to help all of us less-gifted folks crack the code and win that big jackpot.

Vickie Fomby, a Mesquite astrologer and part-time numerologist, is one of those who is delighted that Texas finally has a lottery. Vickie has a company called Nightstar, and she advertises her services in the monthly newsletter from Overtones, the Dallas new-age shop we visited last year (The Skeptic, August, 1991).

"WIN BIG IN THE TEXAS LOTTERY," Vickie's ads shouts next to a drawing of a hand holding a bag of money with a giant dollar sign on it. "Use your PERSONAL LUCKY NUMBERS given in a Day-to-Day Forecast on easy to read Computer Printout." Vickie then lists her fees: one month for \$5, three months for \$10, six months for \$15, and the super-jumbo bulk-pack economy size of 12 months for just \$25. "Please include your BIRTHNAME and BIRTHDATE and the months you want your personal Lucky Numbers run for."

I called Vickie at 288-7688 to ask about her new service. I was especially curious how her lucky numbers could help, since the Texas lottery is a simple blind-luck scratch-off game.

Vickie reminded me that although the only game available now is the scratch-off, Texas will have the fancy computerized games soon, including a lotto-type pick-six game. She said she started to advertise now so people could find out about her before the new games start.

Just what would I get for my \$5, I asked. Vickie told me that it all starts with my birth date and birth name, just like her ad said. She said that she distills each of those significant bits of information into just a single digit, by means of a simple additive reduction.

Strictly By The Numbers

For example, Vickie explained, my birth date of January 13, 1957 would reduce down to 9 ($1+1+3+1+9+5+7=27$, $2+7=9$, voila!). Likewise, each letter in my name is assigned a number corresponding to its position in the alphabet, and then reduced using the same system. This simple-minded but somehow cosmically significant system is the basis of numerology, Vickie told me.

Vickie said that she could just send me those two digits, if I wanted. Then I could play the scratch-off game on dates favorable to those numbers.

"Let's say your lucky numbers were two and eight," she advised. "Then you would want to play on the second and the eighth of the month, for sure. You'd also want to play on the tenth, since that's eight plus two."

"Oh, I see, or on the twenty-eighth?" I asked hopefully, feeling that I had latched on to the system.

"Yes, that's right!" Vickie said. Boldly, I pressed her for even more lucky dates from my two special numbers. "And the sixth, since that's eight minus two?"

No, Vickie told me. The sixth won't be any good, because you're not supposed to subtract your lucky numbers. Well, how about the sixteenth, which is eight times two? Vickie told me that wouldn't work, either. No multiplication was allowed. I asked if possibly the fourth would be an acceptable lucky date, since that's eight divided by two. Wrong again, Vickie scolded. No division. I was beginning to see that this numerology stuff was best left to trained professionals like Vickie who know all the ins and outs.

Would I get just those two numbers and that's it forever, since my birth date and birth name are never going to change, I asked? Vickie told me that she could send me a whole printout of my lucky numbers, from zero all the way up to 999. She would use a computer program to figure all of these out, she told me. She just feeds in the name and date, and the computer does the rest. It uses a combination of numerology and astrology to produce lucky numbers for each month, she said.

"I'm really just an astrologer," Vickie confided. "I just got this computer program to do this numerology, and I thought I'd offer it to my astrology clients as well."

Vickie went on to relate how her friend from Overtones, Joan Edwards, had suggested she try the numerology angle. Joan is a big horse-racing fan, Vickie said, and she was trying numerology at the track. When I asked if Joan ever won when she bet the lucky numbers, Vickie said that Joan told her that she would have won, but she didn't bet on those races. Pity. If Joan was psychic, she would have known that. Every railbird at Trinity Meadows will offer the same lament.

Absolutely, Definitely Non-Committal

It was time to pop the big question. "Does this stuff really work?" I asked. "Well ... some people think it works," Vickie said. "I haven't had any complaints yet!"

But have any of Vickie's clients actually won a jackpot with her magic numbers? Vickie admitted that she hadn't heard of any big winners yet, but that she only had a few clients so far and they haven't been playing for long.

I told Vickie that anyone could win eventually, playing any system or no system at all. The only limiting factors for anyone winning a lottery are time and the quantity of tickets purchased. Lottery odds are so hideously terrible that statistically, you are far more likely to die from poisoning, for example, than to win a big lottery jackpot. As the old saying goes, you are about as likely to win the lottery whether you buy a ticket or not. Still, I wanted to know if Vickie took her own medicine.

"Do you use it?" I asked. "Oh! I'm just too busy," Vickie laughed. "I'm not much of a gambler, I'm afraid."

Gamble? Who said anything about gambling? Vickie's ad made it sound like a sure thing! I thought the reason anyone would use a "lucky number" service like Vickie's would be to eliminate the chance aspect of the lottery. If I wanted to gamble by playing the lottery, I certainly didn't need Vickie's magic numbers!

If it works, I wondered aloud, why not just use it to win the big jackpots for yourself, instead of selling the winning numbers for five bucks? Vickie said that she didn't feel comfortable using her special gifts to such a self-serving end, but rather felt a better use would be in helping others to hit it big. Nothing short of the selfless dedication of a true professional.

Since it sounded as if Vickie had less than rock-solid confidence in her own services, I asked her if she offered any kind of guarantee. If I didn't scratch off that big winner after a few weeks, could I just settle for my money back instead of the million-dollar jackpot, no hard feelings? Alas, Vickie told me she didn't offer any kind of guarantee, and that it was up to each client to determine if the system was working or not.

It would be pretty clear to anyone whether or not Vickie's magic numbers were working. You'd either be ahead or behind, net , in just a short while. The scratch-off games are designed to string people along and encourage a habit of frequent play with lots of little \$2 and \$5 "winners," which are almost always redeemed with (what else?) additional lottery tickets. Lottery merchants are so eager to move tickets that some volunteer to give you the change from your purchase in lottery tickets rather than cash, even when you didn't purchase any tickets to begin with.

Vickie and I chatted about astrology, too. She guessed that I "must be a Libra," since I asked "so many questions." That didn't give me any more confidence in her astrological powers, or in her listening skills, since I told her my birth date earlier in our discussion. I also makes me think that not very many people who call Vickie are as curious as I was about her methods or results.

I told Vickie that I appreciated all the information, but I wasn't so sure that her services were such a good investment. She told me to think about it and get back to her if I ever changed my mind. I told her I'd probably change my mind the same day I see her picture in the newspaper as the latest Lone Star Millions jackpot winner. She laughed.

Opportunistic, bottom-feeding scamster is probably much too strong a term for lightweight hokum-peddlers like Vickie Fomby and should be reserved for the true superstars of con, like faith-healing televangelists. But, like the TV preachers, astrologers and psychics and their colleagues in the pixie dust industry are totally unregulated and accountable to no one, so they are free to cash in on the lottery mystique as they see fit with no risk whatsoever. They're the only sure winners in the state's new numbers racket.

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Healthy skepticism

Dr. White's "Vision Therapy"

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

For some time now, optometrist Leonard R. White has been advertising his "Vision Therapy Center" in Fort Worth.

His newspaper ads offer "Vision Neurological Assessment & Therapy" for "Learning Disabilities, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Disorders, and At Risk Students." The "visual skills" of convergence, accommodation, and tracking are authoritatively said to be among the "prerequisite" and "functional" abilities necessary to reading that, it is implied, are deficient in children who experience difficulties in school, say Dr. White's ads.

Fortunately, we are told, Dr. White is among those who are "specialists in neuro-optometry [who] are putting the senses together (vision, auditory, tactile, proprioception and vestibular) so that the brain can indeed coordinate and integrate." Dr. White's "vision therapy" is said to "help clients utilize all the elements of vision so that they can find success in reading."

Accompanying photographs show how Dr. White's therapy works. In one, he's shown swinging a ball in front of a reclining youngster, apparently an exercise intended to improve tracking. In another, a patient is looking at a vision chart of some kind while standing on a trampoline, presumably a kind of balance training.

Dr. White also distributes material from the Optometric Extension Program Foundation, Inc., in Santa Ana, California. One of these, a brochure entitled "I Was Nearly a Dropout," is a lengthy testimonial of a young woman who "was an underachiever in school and had been most of [her] life. But, luckily, an optometrist was able to diagnose her problem "as a reaction to stress created by the use of the eyes for close work and [which], in turn, brings about an interference in the coordination of the visual system." With the institution of a "visual training course," her school grades "rose a grade point per subject - and then kept on rising!"

In another brochure, A.M. Skeffington, "the originator of behavioral optometry," explains "'Learning Lenses' in the Beginning School Grades." Here it is asserted that "vision is usually acquired well by the child, until the culture faces him with the printed page. ... But the child cannot avoid all reading. So what may happen is a distortion of the visual system structures. ... If we could live as our prehistoric ancestors did, avoiding all near tasks, there would be no problem. ..." It is asserted as fact that "underachievers in the classroom usually have better than average standard acuity (clear sight), yet ... over 70% of this group have problems in using their vision, even though they have 20/20 eyesight or better." The solution, it is said, is to put "a convex spherical plus spectacle lens" on youngsters to "protect the child from developing 'eye problems' and 'ocular defects.' Without such protective lenses, 80% of children develop a measurable 'ocular defect' by grade five." Thus, it is concluded, "there is little question that every child would benefit from using learning lenses in the classroom."

Neither brochure gives citations, though Skeffington claims the support of scientific studies for his assertions. He lists 21 "For Further Reference" works, five of which are from the same Optometric Extension Program Foundation. Only one appears to be from the medical literature and of dubious relevance to the claims being made.

But there's a certain sort of reasonableness about it all, nevertheless. After all, it's not like you're being expected to believe in psychic powers, the Loch Ness Monster, or UFOs shanghaiing people. Neither do optometrists have a reputation in most people's minds for quack entrepreneurialism.

Someone whose child is doing poorly in school, and especially one who may be afraid of their child becoming a dropout, might very well take a flyer on "vision therapy." Parents who feel that their kids may not be living up to their academic potential might also decide to give it a try. And who could blame them for being glad to see their medical insurance carrier being sent the bills? Moreover, children who are given the attention and are able to comply with the discipline of a "visual training program" might very well show some improvement in their school behavior and performance, regardless of any change in their ocular health.

But the real questions are simply these: 1) Whether measurable visual problems can account for learning disabilities, and 2) Whether "vision training," "learning lenses," and the like are effective in preventing and/or correcting such problems. No amount of arguing about these other things, or about whether our prehistoric ancestors "avoid[ed] all near tasks" -- they did gather roots and berries and make simple stone tools, after all -- will answer these simple questions. Only the facts can.

Here's what the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus had to say about the claims of Drs. White and Skeffington in a

recent joint statement:

"Children with dyslexia or related learning disabilities have the same ocular health statistically as children without such conditions. There is no peripheral eye defect that produces dyslexia or other learning disabilities, and there is no eye treatment that can cure dyslexia or associated learning disabilities. ... Ocular defects should be identified as early as possible and, when correctable, managed by the ophthalmologist ... but if no ocular defect is found, the child should be referred to a pediatrician to coordinate required multidisciplinary care. ... No scientific evidence supports claims that the academic abilities of dyslexic or learning disabled children can be improved with treatment based on (a) visual tracking, including muscle exercises, ocular pursuit, tracking exercises, or 'training' glasses (with or without bifocals or prisms); (b) neurological organizational training (laterality training, crawling, balance board, perceptual training); or (c) tinted or colored lenses. Some controversial methods of treatment result in a false sense of security that may delay or even prevent proper instruction or remediation [emphasis added]. The expense of these methods is unwarranted, and they cannot be substituted for appropriate remedial educational measures."

The D/FW Council Against Health Fraud issued a press statement on August 19th calling attention to these facts. Coincidentally, (what else could it be?) an issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association came out the same day and carried an article entitled "The Biology of Developmental Dyslexia." The author, a member of the Child Psychiatry Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health, mentions a number of misconceptions that "deserve mention because of their popularity, despite their lack of scientific support and, in some cases, evidence to the contrary." These include the notions that "visual-spatial deficits underlie dyslexia," and that "therapies designed to improve visual perception, such as optometric training for binocular coordination and eye-tracking exercises, are effective." "In fact," notes the article, "such treatments are unsubstantiated and frequently costly."

A total of 48 citations, most from the peer-reviewed medical scientific literature, are given in the joint statement and the JAMA article.

Clearly, if quackery is "the promotion of medical schemes or remedies known to be false, or which are unproven, for a profit," as a 1984 Congressional report put it, "vision therapy" is quackery. The professional societies know it, ophthalmologists know it, and now you know it. But the general public may be a long time in figuring it out.

Why? It's because the media, and the regulatory bodies, political creatures that they are, need victims that know they're victims and who kick and cry and scream bloody murder about it. That's something that health fraud victims rarely do, as they're either too embarrassed or, more commonly, they don't even know that they've been ripped off. That's because a large part of medical quackery is a confidence game. Quacks gain the trust and confidence of their patients in exactly the same way that ethical and legitimate practitioners of medical science do, and there is no way for a patient/victim to tell the difference based on their feelings. Indeed, the most successful quacks are often super-salesmen. It's just that they base what they say and do on unsupported claims, pseudoscience, and out-and-out fantasy. But how are people who aren't experts to know?

Several ophthalmologists that I spoke to, including one in academic medicine, agreed with this assessment of the situation. But, incredibly, most disdained any interest or inclination in publicly calling attention to such an open practice of medical quackery as "vision therapy." They are afraid of becoming embroiled in civil litigation or of drawing fire from antitrust enforcers who might see them as engaging in anti-competitive activity under some twisted theory of law.

So what's the lesson here? Just because the government takes your money to supposedly regulate medical professionals as well as drugs, devices, and other medical services, don't think that you can rely on being told the truth. If you don't want to get ripped off, here's some advice: "buyer beware!"

This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. We welcome new members and would like especially to suggest that you let your doctor know of the existence and efforts of the Council in combating false, misleading and questionable claims in the areas of health and nutrition. The Council has found that most physicians do not have the time and inclination to look into what they quite rightly consider to be rubbish. But with your help, the Council can provide the resources your doctor needs to advance the cause of skepticism in this important area. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX, 76006, or call metro 214-263-8989

Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and an NTS Technical Advisor.

Fringe theory of the month

#2 In A Continuing Series

Compiled by Mike Sullivan

Since last month when we began featuring the writings of fringe authors in our pages, we have been faced with the dilemma of selecting an appropriate piece from the ample supply available. It's not always easy to find a fringe-related article that meets all of our high standards for publication: coherent and less than 2,000 words.

With so much to choose from each month, it will be hard to convince our readers that we are not selecting the most sensational, wildest items we find for each issue. For example, we were forced to choose this month from among these tantalizing offerings:

Starship Engines by Anthra Andromda -- "Starship engines come in two flavors; for strictly interstellar propulsion, and for combined interstellar/planetary travel and atmospheric use. This paper will treat the latter of these. The engine described here is suitable for either interstellar or atmospheric travel. This engine is of a dual-mode design; it will optionally produce either gravitons or tachyons." This is followed by six pages of incredibly vague construction tips and psycho-physics babble about Tesla coils and mu-metal, and the author's suggestion that at least a 80386-based PC be used to control the engine for planetary flights.

Alien Descriptions - Varieties by David House -- "Varieties of alien beings known to 'interact' with humans and supposedly involved in influencing human affairs." An informative description of the main types of interstellar aliens living and working in America today: the greys from Zeta Reticuli, the reptilians, and of course the three types of Human-Type Aliens, one of which comes from Arcturus and Vega.

Counter Measures for Men In Black Encounters by Robert Parish, who starts his paper by saying, "After reading various reports of people who have had encounters with Men In Black after a UFO related siting {sic} or happening, it has brought to my attention that common, average people without any previous military tactical or planing {sic} training are defenseless to the tactics that have been reported to frighten and intimidate these people to be silent or change their minds about reporting or turning over any information or evidence to UFO Investigators." Mr. Parish then offers his advice on psychological counter-measures when the G-men come to your place to cover up your alien encounter.

This month, we reprint some ramblings about the alleged "deal" between that bastion of air-tight secrecy, the United States Government, and alien visitors from other galaxies. This diatribe was found on the CompuServe computer service and is reprinted verbatim and without comment for your entertainment as a typical example of so much of the informal UFO literature.

A government-alien "deal?"

UFOsearch

110 Bourn Ave.
Columbia, MO 65203

Researcher: Val Germann

The first leaks directly concerning a "deal" were published about two years ago by the son of the man who founded Lear Instruments. John Lear had credibility and caused a sensation in the world of "Ufology," the study of UFOs. With the Lear letters as a framework this author has gone back over 40 years of material and found that the idea of a "deal" does no violence to the story as we know it. In fact, a "deal" would help explain some things that have been inexplicable.

1. Hints of such a thing were in the literature at least as far back as 1953. The last chapter of Keyhoe's Flying Saucers From Outer Space strongly suggests that "communication" was even then in progress. I urge everyone to look at FSFOS again.
2. Our news is managed at a very high level. In 1944 and 1945 the Government successfully hid the explosion of more than 200 Japanese "FUGO" balloons in the continental United States. The press cooperated even though lives were lost. There was no "UFO scare" resulting from these balloon flights and there were no "mass hallucinations." NO pilots lost their lives chasing them. And the general public is STILL not aware of the existence of these balloons. Think about it. Would the Skyhook cover have worked in 1947-48 if people had known about "FU GO?"
3. The explosion of the Trinity bomb in July of 1945 was kept from "resonating" to the major media by a strong combination of ridicule and denial. Hiding UFOs is child's play compared to suppressing the explosion of nuclear weapons in the continental United States. But the A-Bomb secret did not get out TO THE NATION AT LARGE until it was LET out after the war. There were thousands of people who "saw something." But the Federal people said there was nothing to it. Things are no different today.
4. Kenneth Arnold could not understand why the sighting he had "resonated" around the world. Thousands of people {sic} contacted him as a result of the publicity he received. Read his original statement in the Blue Book papers. He was rebuffed by the FBI and casually treated by military intelligence. ON THE SURFACE.

Now, however, it is apparent that more detailed information was being provided to the "Air Force" by various friends of Arnold who were contacted on the QT. As for Arnold himself, he drew his own conclusions from the lack of real interest and assumed (correctly, I think) that the powers that be already knew what they needed to know. I have the distinct impression that the Arnold incident was SUPPOSED to go around the world, that it was MADE to "resonate" as part of a large-scale Government campaign whose goals are still a secret.

5. By the end of 1947, 90 per cent plus of the American people knew of the "Flying Saucer." Reports flooded in to both the press and officialdom. Yet there never was put in hand an investigation by any independent civilian scientific entity. And on top of that, no private party ever bankrolled even a medium-scale investigation that included interception and/or aerial photography.

That this SHOULD have happened and DIDN'T happen is in my opinion very significant.

6. A radio reporter in Seattle was told in 1950 that there were "aliens" on Earth who looked just like human beings. He was also told that the "Government" knew all about this but was afraid to let the public in on the secret. There was fear of panic. There was a program in place to use a combination of information and disinformation to slowly prepare people for the worst. This program was to use both "novels and motion pictures." This account is contained in a 1960s book by Mr. Steiger. It was buried on about page 100 and was printed without comment from the author. This account fits in well with what I have been told locally and, I think, independently.
7. There has never been a truly wide-ranging study of UFO reports, investigators and witnesses. From the beginning the field has been left (officially) to independent workers who have operated on miniscule {sic} budgets. These independents have lost, destroyed and suppressed more information than they have ever published. Some of these "independents" have worked for the intelligence community.

Long before Moore these folks were being used by the government for disinformation purposes. What could have been easier? Thus the study of the "UFO" has been hobbled, crippled and made to creep along at a snail's pace. With no continuity every new worker has to re-invent the wheel and then operate in a partial vacuum. This is not, in my opinion, an accident. Rather, it is the desired result of a covert plan.

8. Every "advance" in the field of "Ufology" has followed an event with strong disinformation or intelligence connections. The original Arnold sighting is an example. So are the books by Scully and Adamski. Keyhoe got most of his good information from the military. The Lorenzens both were working at White Sands in the middle 1950s! Probably they were on the level but how did they BOTH end up in very sensitive jobs at one of the most sensitive places on Earth? The Zamora case happened on the edge of White Sands and featured human like "occupants". The Lorenzens got there while the military was still making its first investigations. It was this case that Allen Hynek said caused him to "break" with the Air Force. Well, maybe, but I wonder. The Barney and Betty Hill case has strong intelligence connections. A close reading of Interrupted Journey shows that it was a couple of strange visitors who actually told the Hills they had "missing time". Raymond Fowler and Len Stringfield are both ex-military and ex-intelligence community members. It is only with Missing Time and Communion that we see real "civilians" at the forefront of the UFO revelations.

What Lear says does no real damage to those two books. In fact, they both dovetail pretty well. Look what happened to the movie version of Communion. It received almost no publicity, got limited distribution and died quickly. This, in my opinion, is no accident.

9. What is the truth? I don't know. All I can say is that even I am hearing things here in mid-Missouri that bear on current problems. A contactee in Northern Missouri has told me that much of what Lear says is true. This person believes that a close relative has been implanted and been "working" for people resembling the famous "men in black" since the middle 1950s. This person seems both proud (to have been "selected") and very frightened. This person has recently been given a "new assignment" and dares not refuse.
10. A Cooper County farmer told me in March of last year that he saw a "tall grey thing with a snout" in his cornfield in 1978. Check out Bill Cooper's article in the October UFO Universe. Look at the description he gives for the "greys" we supposedly have the "deal" with. They are said to have "big noses." There is something going on here, something important--important to us all.

The third eye

By Pat Reeder

In this age when personal political beliefs are shoe-horned into everything from jeans commercials to second-rate sitcoms, I am proud that I make a concerted effort to keep my own personal politics out of this column. I try to keep it focused purely on matters relating to media reporting of pseudoscience and the occult. Therefore, please do not take the following as any sort of political endorsement. Whom you vote for is your own business. But when a candidate for national office deliberately attacks good science and skeptical thinking, he's just lobbed the first bomb at us and become fair game.

And who is this candidate who so despises critical scientific debate? Well, he's a candidate for Vice President. And no, he is NOT Dan Quayle.

Sen. Al Gore, a second generation politician with no discernable training or background in science, is the author of Earth In The Balance, one of the biggest-selling books on environmental science and climatology in history. From my perspective, the book is a hodgepodge of New Age pop psychobabble (to save the environment, we must "leaven male perspectives with a healthier respect for female ways of experiencing the world") and unwarranted leaps of logic, based upon dubious source materials. But there are lots of alarmist books like this on the market, many of them written by some of Gore's chief sources, including Paul Ehrlich and Jeremy ("Cows are destroying the world!") Rifkin. So why single out this one? Two reasons...

First, Gore...a man who proposes a radical "Global Marshall Plan" involving a change in "the very foundation of our civilization," in order to deal with ecological problems that some scientists say range from the implausible to the imaginary...stands a good chance of being a heartbeat away from the most powerful job in the world. And secondly,

Gore has gone so far as to single out the Skeptic's philosophy of life for condemnation.

The September 14th issue of National Review offers a lengthy and critical examination of the doomsday theories in Gore's book, questioning both the science and the math therein, and contrasting his claims with the dissenting views of other, reputable scientists. This is the very core of science: put forth a theory, and you must expect to have to answer hard questions about it from other scientists. Well, Sen. Gore will have none of that.

National Review quotes Gore from the January 2, 1989, issue of Time: "That we face an ecological crisis without any precedent in historical terms is no longer a matter of any dispute worthy of recognition." Gore went on to say that global warming skeptics are "hurting our ability to respond" and that press attention to skeptical scientists "undermines the effort to build a solid base of public support for the difficult actions we must take soon."

Let me get this straight. Sen. Gore, a politician with no scientific background, insists that the world is teetering on the brink of an ecological Apocalypse...one which requires \$100 billion in new taxes, major limits on free market commerce, and an upheaval in the very structure of society...but reputable scientists are not allowed to publicly question his theories, even if they find them to be based on incorrect or incomplete data, unsupported by evidence, arrived at through faulty calculations, and formulated by discredited futurists with a very clear political agenda?

Sorry, Al. No can do.

I'm worried about the environment, too. I regularly contribute to a number of scientifically sound environmental organizations. So it's hardly my contention that we should plunder the Earth, foul the air and water, and waste precious resources. But I think that the First Amendment is also a precious resource that's worth protecting. It gives everyone the freedom to speak, including those rare individuals who actually think before doing so.

We do the environment no favors if we formulate environmental policy without scientific research and open debate. Informed skepticism is always much healthier for society than blind belief in the pronouncements of zealots. Whether I am dealing with psychics, astrologers, religious fanatics, or doomsday environmentalists, I will continue to demand the right to question their extraordinary claims, and to demand extraordinary proof. And yes, I'll even do the unthinkable...before I lend credence to their predictions for the future, I'll look at their past predictions of what the present would be like, and check their batting averages.

In the late 1970's, Al Gore fought against deregulation of oil and natural gas on the basis that it would decrease supplies and cause skyrocketing prices. Instead, prices plummeted, and the reserve supply is larger than ever...so much so that in his book, Gore suggests averting the "global warming crisis" by using more of our huge reserves of clean, cheap natural gas!

And what were many of his advisors on "global warming" doing twenty years ago? Predicting a new Ice Age.

In a recent Rolling Stone article on the Earth Summit in Brazil, humorist P.J. O'Rourke described Sen. Gore as "a man of truly vice presidential stature." Perhaps that is the reason for his fear of skepticism. Or maybe the reason can be found in an observation by that famous skeptic, H.L. Mencken: "The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary."

Oh, well. At least Sen. Gore isn't running for high office. He's just running for Vice President. But if his ticket wins, let me be among the first to say: "President Clinton, please take very, very, very good care of yourself. And stay out of the sun, now, y'hear?"

Up a tree: a skeptical cartoon

By Laura Ainsworth



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