



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Startling news at MIOS

by John Blanton

Not much surprises me anymore at the MIOS (Metroplex Institute for Origin Science) meetings. Turns out that's what it was this time.

Don Patton started it off. He had spent a busy past two weeks, he told me, including attending the Annual Meeting of the Geological Society of America in Salt Lake City on October 23 (AKA, Millennium Day). He chided me to the effect, "You accuse creationists of never publishing in refereed journals." He had done just *that* he said.

This was stunning news. "What refereed journal?" He reminded me this was the GSA. Trying to play dumb (easy sometimes) I repeated the question. Don conceded that *Geology* is the official journal of the GSA. At this point I was doing an internal check to see if my brain had reset. Could this stuff about Millennium miracles really be true.

While waiting for the evening talk to begin I continued the mental inventory. I went through an exercise I perform out of habit with the creationists, and one point filtered out: Don never said he published in *Geology*.

After repeating for the audience what he had told me, Don introduced the night's speaker, David Meyers. David is a bright, enthusiastic and energetic biology teacher in the honors program at McArthur High School in Irving. He is surely the best kind of teacher a public school like McArthur High can get, unfortunately for the McArthur High honors students.

David's talk was on "The Consequences of Evolution," and he reminded us he is a creationist who tries to encourage his students to question the bases for evolution and to be ready to examine the alternatives. He even had one in mind.

David has been at McArthur for twenty years, and he became a creationist within the last fifteen. The inability of science to give purpose, he told us, led him to favor "creation" rather than the purely mechanistic processes allowed by evolution. He doesn't use "evolution" in his lectures. Rather he likes the term "change by chance." Also, he uses "intelligent design" instead of "creation."

"Social Darwinism" is another hobgoblin of David's. It's a natural outgrowth of Darwinism, he told us, and it has been

used to justify oppression and genocide in recent history. Without evolution there would be no "social Darwinism." This seemed to be a repetition of a theme that runs through creationism as well as a number of other strained belief systems. The consequences are so odious, the news must be wrong.

David is a "young-Earth" creationist. Good thing. Otherwise he would have been a dog in the manger at MIOS. Anyhow, in all his science training he has remained convinced that those bright minds, his teachers, plus the scientists working in the field and in the lab are all either lying or deluded. Radiological dating is wrong. The geological evidence is wrong. The evidence from DNA sequencing is wrong. The archeological evidence of pre-Genesis civilizations is wrong. The evidence from cosmology is wrong. Someone is fooling someone. Or else someone hasn't been doing their homework.

He never got into the details of his classroom lectures, but I don't think he stands up before all his students and tells them that evolution and modern geology are just a lie. He says he encourages them "to examine both sides of the issue."

In an article in the October issue of *Scientific American* titled "What Are They Thinking?" author Rebecca Zacks discusses why students don't believe in evolution. Harvard University researcher Brian J. Alters and University of Southern California educational psychologist William B. Michael recently surveyed more than 1,200 college freshmen. Forty-five percent reject evolution, and these predominately hold erroneous beliefs about science in general and evolution in particular. Philip M. Sadler, director of science education at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics agrees with Alters that school curricula should meet these misconceptions head on. For children "the process of learning science is a process of abandoning their own previous views" according to Sadler. Without specific evidence "the ideas simply will not change." David Meyers' talk leaves me with the feeling that his students will not get that evidence.

I look forward to more excitement in the future at MIOS. This night Don Patton showed us more of his marvelous photos of petroglyphs by prehistoric Americans showing live dinosaurs. The depiction of the triceratops is especially striking when you use your imagination. How could the Indians have made these drawings if dinosaurs died out 64 million years ago he asks. Additionally, he now has video of mammoths in Nepal, where the beasts account for 200 dead civilians a year (in addition to the toll from tigers and pythons). Don's going to show us the tape as soon as he gets permission.

Finally, I wanted to confirm the remarkable news about Don's publication in a refereed journal. I chatted with him before leaving. In what issue of *Geology* could I find his paper? Well, not exactly in *Geology* he cautioned. He and David McQueen had only delivered a paper at the meeting about rapid sedimentation, and it would be printed in the meeting's *proceedings*. But it *was* refereed. Here is the note from the session schedule published by the GSA:

McQueen, David R.*, Patton, Don , Swift, Dennis : CATASTROPHIC DEPOSITIONAL EVENTS WITHIN THE UPPER EOCENE (LATE UINTAN?) PARACAS FORMATION OF COASTAL PERU [50598]

This is a subject Don has aired previously at the MIOS meetings, and it's a story in itself. For those interested I have the abstract and URLs to the GSA Web pages.

The third eye

By Pat Reeder

Shame on you, you evil skeptics! You, with your ceaseless reasonable questions and insatiable requests for scientific evidence! YOU are personally responsible for poisoning the air, killing children, boiling the oceans, exterminating animal species, making the ozone layer look like a big slice of Swiss cheese, and cooking Mother Earth into a big, flaming marshmallow that will soon be spinning helplessly into the blazing inferno of the sun!!!

Whoops, sorry. I've just been so immersed in the cauldron of overheated special interest group propaganda and half-baked pseudoscientific hooey that passes for news here at the End of History, I got caught up in the popular fervor. Yes,

you might have thought that this is football season or the holiday season, but if you've tuned in to a network newscast recently, you know that it is, in fact, Open Season on Skeptics.

The chief witch-hunter hunter is, of course, America's #1 pollution-hating tobacco farmer, Al Gore. After several years of haranguing the president with factoids gleaned from such shaky prognosticators as Paul Ehrlich and Jeremy Rifkin, Gore seems to have convinced Bill Clinton that global warming is not merely a possibility but is already happening, despite the fact that U.S. weather satellites have recorded a drop in temperature of about half a degree Fahrenheit over the past 20 years. (Sorry! There I go again, yielding to my evil skeptical tendencies and dragging facts into a discussion of global warming. I'll try to control myself.)

Anyhoo, Al and his fellow global warmers have borrowed a page from Joseph Goebbels, to wit: "If you can just get the media to repeat something often enough, even if it's a load of absolute drivel, people will start to believe it." Thus, he sponsored that surreal White House global warming conference for TV weathermen (good luck telling them apart from the politicians), in the hope that their viewers would be gullible enough to believe that someone who can't tell them if it's going to rain next weekend can accurately predict what the temperature will be in 2015.

By a bad stroke of luck, a handful of the weather forecasters actually knew something about the weather, and Al's global warming pitch met with a cool front from them. However, there was no such resistance from general news reporters, and now, every story on the environment that comes from ABC News (America's number one news source, God help us) begins with an intro. something along the lines of, "With most scientists now in full agreement that global warming is a reality..." They've also birthed a new cliché: "2500 scientists, including many Nobel Prize winners, have signed on to a UN report confirming the existence of global warming." This assertion is total poppycock, but it has been repeated so often, virtually verbatim, that it has now been drilled into the heads of the public like a mantra, and vast numbers of Americans seriously believe we're all about to shrivel up from global warming, just as we were all about to shiver to death from the new ice age back in the early 1970s.

Of course, any campaign to rouse the populace to action or sacrifice must consist of two elements. Propaganda is only half the equation. You must also come up with a scapegoat, and I am honored to inform you that it is (drum-roll)...us! That's right, fellow skeptics: just as I pointed out in the first paragraph, we are to blame. From Al Gore's *Earth In The Balance* to Ross Gelbspan's operatically overblown bestseller *The Heat Is On*, global warming skeptics are depicted as sneaky minions of coal and oil companies (where's my check, Exxon?), hampering desperately-needed draconian measures to save the earth by lobbing endless and pointless questions, such as, "What global warming?" and "Do you have any scientific evidence at all that the problem you want to spend \$300 billion of our money to fix actually exists?"

Zealots like Gore and Gelbspan have attacked skeptics by name, urged that they be ignored or silenced, barred highly-credentialed skeptical scientists from participating in conferences on global warming, and in some cases, baldly accused skeptics of being paid corporate stooges and agents of death and destruction. Maybe they should just build concentration camps for us. After all, we're the only people left who know how to concentrate.

If you think I'm overstating the level of hatred that has been stirred up against skeptics, then you obviously missed a recent episode of ABC's "Politically Incorrect." Host Bill Maher is a very witty comedian, but sadly, he seems to get all his information on the environment straight from Al Gore, just as he gets all his information on wildlife and Native American history from Disney cartoons. His guests on this show included actor/writer/lawyer Ben Stein and environmentalist/ex-"Baywatch" actress Alexandra Paul.

The subject was doomsday environmentalism, and Maher and Paul were full of it, in every sense of that term. Stein, obviously a very well-read man, was appalled at the nonsense he was hearing, but he answered the charges calmly and rationally, citing facts that backed him up about air quality, total forest acreage, etc. Well, nothing upsets a fanatic like a fact expressed calmly, and Paul and Maher began screaming like hyenas. At one point, Maher angrily yelled at Stein that yes, he DOES believe global warming is going on right now, the planet is dying, we're running out of resources, he's going to die from breathing the air, "and it's all the fault of people like YOU!" That is, people who answer hysteria with facts. You know: skeptics.

Three of my favorite exchanges from the show: When Stein followed Maher's outburst by asking him, "Bill, do you REALLY believe you're going to die from breathing air?" Yes, Maher firmly replied, he does. (He should STOP

breathing it and see how long he lives)...When Maher answered one of Stein's arguments by shouting, "That's not true! Where are you getting this crap?!" and Stein deadpanned, "From the Statistical Abstract of the United States"...And one of the all-time classic TV moments, when an arm-waving Alexandra Paul defended the high-minded population control methods of the Chinese government ("Crunch!" go the tank treads) by declaring, "There are a billion Chinese! If they increase their population just one percent a year, that's 100 million people!" Stein stared at her for a second, dumbfounded, then said, "That's ten percent." Guess the auditions for "Baywatch" didn't involve a math quiz.

None of this is to say that there is nothing to global warming. There might be, and there might not be. It certainly merits further study, but that's not what the alarmists want: they want total control, right now, and they want to convince you that there's no time to think about it. Sorry, I don't accept that tactic from car salesmen, and I won't accept it from them. It's in these manufactured "crisis" situations that it's most vital to ask tough questions and demand answers based on real science. If questioning our leaders be treason, then let us make the most of it.

Well, at least when the brown-shirted eco-warriors come to drag you away for being too logical, you can't say I didn't warn you. In the meantime, I'll suggest a little light reading, to prove that not all scientists swallow the global warming line.

On June 17, the New York Times ran an interesting article by William K. Stevens about former National Academy of Sciences president Dr. Frederick Seitz's contention that the UN report on global warming was altered and corrupted by political partisans, to make it look more conclusive than it really is. The very next day, the Times ran a profile on climate expert Dr. Richard S. Lindzen of NAS and MIT, who has taken many slings and arrows for flatly stating that there is no evidence to support the global warming hypothesis, and that to trust the computer models which predict global warming "is like trusting a ouija board." Lindzen explains his views in detail and also claims that he has gotten many calls and letters from skeptics in the scientific community who agree with him but won't say so, either because they fear for their careers or because they know that jumping on the global warming bandwagon is a great way to keep those grant dollars flowing in. This is science?

If you'd like to read those articles, they can be found on AOL in the NY *Times* archives, or you can come up to my remote mountain hideout, where I'll be safely locked up with my canned pemmican and my skeptical reading material, waiting for the end of Dark Ages II.

Speaking of menacing the populace with imaginary hobgoblins, Washington *Post* columnist James Glassman had an excellent column recently on how easy it is to manipulate scientifically illiterate people. It concerned Nathan Zohner, 14, of Idaho Falls, Idaho. For his junior high science project last spring, Nathan passed around a petition to ban "Dihydrogen Monoxide: The Unrecognized Killer." The petition claimed that DHMO causes the deaths of thousands of Americans each year through accidental ingestion, causes severe burns in gaseous form, is so corrosive it destroys metal, is a major component of acid rain, has been found in cancerous tumors, causes excessive sweating and urination, and for people who have developed a dependency on it, complete withdrawal causes certain death.

Nathan told his fellow students that they could discuss this with their teachers before signing, but 86 percent of them thought Dihydrogen Monoxide sounded so dangerous, they signed the petition to ban it without even bothering to ask the chemistry professor what it was. If they had, they would have learned that it is water. Nathan's science project was called "How Gullible Are We?" and it won the grand prize. Sorry, I don't know if Al Gore presented it to him.



Entertainment Tonight recently ran a feature on Hollywood Scientologists, such as John Travolta, Tom Cruise, Kirstie Alley and Jenna "Dharma & Greg" Elfman (she's Dharma, or couldn't you guess?). The piece offered the first-ever peek inside the luxurious detox center in L.A. that the rich and famous pay thousands of dollars to use, along with some hilarious descriptions of that marvelous L. Ron Hubbard cleansing process.

As the eminent toxicologist Kelly Preston (Mrs. Travolta) explained it, all the drugs you've ever taken are locked in your fat cells, and you remove them through a combination of vitamins and saunas. Especially entertaining were her mimicry

of an anesthetized dental patient as she described how her mouth suddenly went numb when she "sweated out" Novocain she'd gotten years ago, and her wide-eyed declaration that this is all on the level, because it was developed with the assistance of "doctors and stuff."



Finally, the Heaven's Gate mansion is up for sale! Sorry, bargain hunters: the owner expects he'll be able to get his asking price of \$1.6 million, despite its history as a launching pad for lunatics. Randall Bell, who specializes in appraising notorious properties, was hired to assess the sales potential, and he thinks it's pretty high.

Bell has developed a 10-point checklist to determine the level of stigma on a property, including "media attention," "death and injuries on site," "event takes on a name" (so far, it's looking bad), "lingering physical reminders of the incident" (Bell says the blood stains are out of the carpet, and I assume that all the Nike boxes have been carted away), and "public perception that the situation could reoccur." He lucked out on that last one, since thanks to the castration ritual, it's extremely doubtful that there will be a "Heaven's Gate: The Next Generation."

So if you have \$1.6 mil, I say, "Go for it." You know it isn't haunted, because they all went to the spaceship. If they do ever decide to come back, there are plenty of spare bedrooms and the tennis court will make a perfect landing pad for the UFO. And besides, if you reject every house that ever held a group of wacko cultists, you'll never be able to live in Southern California.

Plutonium Twaddle

by Ed Hiserodt

Editor's note: This op-ed column originally ran in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette on October 25. It is reprinted by permission of the author, who grants blanket reprint permission. John Blanton will have a reply in next month's issue.)

Oscar Wilde once quipped about journalism: "In giving us the opinions of the uneducated, it keeps us in touch with the ignorance of the community."

Never has this been more true than with recent reporting about the launch of the Cassini satellite and its plutonium power supply.

We were led to believe, by media totally uncritical of the anti-nuclear activists, that there was a danger to millions of people in Florida from a "tragedy" during launch. The culprit was the 72 pounds of plutonium used to generate electrical power during the five-year voyage.

First, they would have the rocket explode, ejecting the power supply and scattering the battery-sized stainless steel canisters in which the offending material is welded. By some hitherto unknown physical process, the canisters would rupture, and plutonium slugs would change to dust and find their way into the bodies of millions of people. Wholesale death by plutonium would then ensue.

OK, let's grant the anti-Cassinoids their argument about dispersal of plutonium over Florida. It doesn't really matter. What few people outside the nuclear industry know is that plutonium is not particularly dangerous.

What? Didn't the Wall Street Journal tell us that Plutonium was toxic beyond all human experience? Haven't we read that plutonium was the most toxic substance known to man? Yes, but those statements are either lies or ravings of the uninformed. Whichever, it is time they are refuted.

Plutonium, the 94th element to be discovered and the first which was man-made, was named in honor of a recent (at that time) planetary discovery, as had been Neptunium and Uranium before it. The 11th most toxic heavy metal, it falls

between lead arsenate (plutonium is one-10th as toxic) and caffeine (plutonium is 10 times as toxic). This "scourge of humanity" is one-trillionth as toxic as botulinus toxin in the bloodstream. Toxicity, incidentally, is measured by comparing the weights of doses which will kill 50 percent of the same type of mammal.

But what about "searing radiation"? Utter twaddle! Plutonium is primarily an alpha emitter as it radioactively decays. Funny thing about alpha radiation: in most circumstances, it is harmless. The rays are stopped by a few inches of air or a thin sheet of paper. You could carry a chunk around in your pocket or purse for years with less effect on your body than the background radiation received in your living room.

Surely, you say, there must be SOME basis for the alleged dangers of plutonium. That's true. It has long been thought that inhaling plutonium in a fine dust would cause lung cancer, since the weak alpha radiation would adversely affect lung tissue, being virtually embedded in it. Because of this, a standard was set limiting the amount of plutonium dust that workers can inhale.

In 1945, an accident in the Hartford plutonium plant subjected 26 workers to lung burdens 25 times that deemed permissible. According to Dr. John Gofman, the anti-Cassini scientific spokesman on 60 Minutes and long-time professional anti-nuke spokesman, this amount of plutonium should have resulted in 1,500 lung cancers — quite a load for 26 pairs of lungs to tote.

So how does the good doctor's opinion square with reality? Not so good. After 40 years, all but three "victims" were still living. One had died in a car crash and two from unrelated heart disease. None had developed cancer, and their death rate was less than half the expected number for their age group.

A prudent man might well consider the risk of cancer from inhaling plutonium dust to be somewhat exaggerated.

What, then, is the Cassini uproar all about? Quite simple. The anti-technologists, who would destroy modern technology that we might toil endlessly to eke out an existence and then die young in a pristine environment, see this as a great propaganda opportunity. They can take advantage of media attention to demonize plutonium and, along with it, everything nuclear.

Interestingly, this seems to be happening in concert with the global-warming baloney being exuded from the White House. Anyone who suggests changing to nuclear-based power, you see, will be hooted down as a politically incorrect heretic. The modern-day Luddites can then reinforce the idea in the public mind that technology is bad, dangerous and inhumane.

Will they be successful in tricking the American people into believing that plutonium, along with alar, asbestos, dioxin and PCBs, is a significant danger? Absolutely. It has already been done. Ask your neighbor if he would rather have an ounce of plutonium or an alligator under his bed.

(Ed Hiserodt is an aerospace engineer and an electrical control manufacturer's representative. He has no connection with the nuclear power industry.)

Good News, Almost

by John Blanton

As we go to press there comes some good news for a change. However, allow me to look a bit on the dark side of it.

The Dallas Morning News carries the headline "Education board gives Texas' schoolbook purchase tentative OK." What they are saying in a story by Terrence Stutz is that the State Board of Education has approved the purchase of a biology text that is favorable to the theory of evolution. The short side is that of 14 members, five of them voted against the purchase because of this favorable treatment. Let me repeat that: Five supposedly educated and responsible members of society whom the people of Texas have chosen to represent their interests, still believe that supernatural forces were

responsible for the creation of our own species.

According to *The News*, board member Richard Watson led the opposition. He maintained the book violated State law because it did not point out weaknesses in the theory of evolution. He is quoted as saying "The Darwinian hypothesis is on very shaky ground to begin with," and he also read a list of inaccuracies in the book. The book's author, Kenneth Miller from Brown University, rejected each complaint and pointed out that Watson's list "was from an old newsletter commenting on another biology book." Further, the board noted that passages from the book represented evolution to be theory, despite Mr. Watson's statements to the contrary.

One disheartening aspect of the whole affair was the politicization of the issue. All of the board members belong to either the Republican or the Democratic parties, and the voting showed a distinct political bias. While three Republicans voted for the text along with the Democratic members, all of those opposed were members of the Republican Party. We can only hope that, in the future, facts of science will not be determined by political allegiance.

Creationist biology teacher David Meyers, speaking at the MIOS meeting this month (see the related story in this issue), told of his disappointment with the outcome of the approval process. Meyers was on the review committee (which provides recommendations to the Board), and his viewpoint obviously lost this round. In previous years NTS member Ron Hastings participated in the review process. Ron has a Ph.D. in physics from Texas A&M University and teaches science in Waxahachie. His support was beneficial in making sure that evolution was included in the current texts.

Contacting the NTS

If you have questions or need assistance in the area of skepticism, or otherwise would like to contact The North Texas Skeptics, use the phone numbers and/or Internet addresses below:

John Blanton (Secretary)
972-306-3187 (home)
ntskeptics@mindspring.com

Keith Blanton (editor)
NewRadical@aol.com

The NTS Web Site
<http://www.ntskeptics.org/>