

## The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics



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## Skepticism and the kettle defense

Editorial by John Blanton

OJ did it. He added a new term to my lexicon.

During the famous trial one of the TV wags was explaining the concept of the "kettle defense." It goes something like this.

A man is suing his neighbor. He claims in court that the neighbor borrowed a kettle from him and returned it damaged. He wants the neighbor to pay reparations.

The neighbor offers his defense in three parts: 1) "I never borrowed the kettle." 2) "It was already damaged when I got it." 3) "It was in perfect condition when I returned it."

Any one claim by itself, successfully defended, would be an adequate defense. When used in tandem like this, each new claim tends to refute previous claims, undermining the defendant's whole case.

What's the connection? When this pattern pops up in an argument that argument tends to lose some of its luster. I'm a skeptical kind of guy anyhow, but the kettle defense tends to make me even more skeptical.

The creationists (read "anti-evolutionists") do this. 1) "All species started out just as they are now, and there haven't been any changes. 2) "Random mutations couldn't possibly produce all of these improvements—there must have been some supernatural power." 3) "These improvements produced by natural selection haven't really produced any new species."

Now I'm hearing it from the anti-environmentalists. Before proceeding let me define some terms. Anti-environmentalists are not necessarily people who oppose the environment. These are not the "Sahara Club," some who, perhaps facetiously, propose cutting down all the redwoods and paving over with concrete. I am talking about those who have an immediate economic interest in refuting the claims of the pro-environment political lobby.

Here is one example: 1) "CFCs can't harm the ozone layer." 2) "Maybe they could harm the ozone layer, but they apparently aren't." 3) "OK, some decrease in the ozone layer is occurring, but CFCs aren't doing it. It's being caused by

natural sources of chlorine." 4) "Actually, this decrease in the ozone layer doesn't seem to be doing anybody any harm."

I've been studying the English language for several years, and I think I know what this is saying: "I don't want to stop making/using CFCs because that's going to cost me money."

Here's another: 1) "There's no way adding CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere will produce global warming." 2) "Human activities are not adding enough CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere to produce much global warming." 3) "Natural sources are the cause of all this CO<sub>2</sub>." 4) "Actually, more CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere is helpful—it makes plants grow." 5) "Hey, global warming will forestall the next ice age, which the climatologists were predicting earlier." To this I might add a suggested 6) "I always wanted ocean front property in Orlando anyhow."

A few Sunday's ago I heard arguments 4 and 5 being advanced by an oil company executive on a news show. He sells products that routinely put a lot of CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere, and proposed remedies are going to change his company's business drastically. He's trying to make as many points as he can in case one of them can't be supported. Actually, point 4 demonstrates he does have reason to worry. More recently, as seen on TV, a scientist studying an imminent volcano eruption in the Northwest was showing off a large section of forest killed off by CO<sub>2</sub> seeping from the ground. Not CO, not H<sub>2</sub>S, but CO<sub>2</sub> is killing the trees.

Of course, there is a lot of silliness being advanced in the name of science these days, and it needs to be refuted by people who really know what they are talking about. I am glad to see every now and then knowledgeable people taking time off from their real jobs and standing in front of a camera explaining the facts and separating the wheat from the chaff. And they don't have to use the kettle defense.

*[As I write this it's 62 degrees outside. Of course it's January. At night.]*

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## **Election day results**

**By John Blanton**

### **Armstrong and Arena issue pass by narrow margins**

Saturday, 17 January: Dallas voters went to the polls today and approved public support of the new downtown arena by a margin of slightly more than 1600 votes. In other voting Phil Armstrong squeaked by in his bid for president of The North Texas Skeptics by an even closer vote. Edging out the next closest contender by five votes, Armstrong became the new Skeptics president. "I couldn't have done it without the help of all my loyal supporters" he told crowds later at a post election victory party.

Skeptical hacks John Blanton and Mark Meyer were able to hold onto their current jobs as Secretary and Treasurer, respectively, while Danny Barnett of the Christian Coalition clinched the VP post.

Officers were elected by the new Board of Directors, who themselves were picked earlier in a poll of members present. The new board consists of Greg Aicklen, Laura Ainsworth, Danny Barnett, John Blanton, and Virginia Vaughn, illustrating the Skeptic's entrenched bias towards the front of the alphabet. Also selected today were Phil Armstrong and Pat Reeder as newsletter editors, Keith Blanton as associate editor, Greg Aicklen as Web master, and Virginia Vaughn as meeting coordinator.

"As you can see," John Blanton told the assembly, "the NTS is run by those who attend the January meeting."

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## **The third eye**

## By Pat Reeder

"The vast majority of scientists have concluded unequivocally that if we do not reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases at some point in the next century, we will disrupt our climate and put our children and grandchildren at risk."

-- Bill Clinton, State of the Union, Tuesday, January 27, 1998

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman."

-- Bill Clinton, News conference, Monday, January 26, 1998

Lesson One in skepticism: "Consider the source."



Speaking of unreliable sources, UPN aired a "documentary" in January that still has people in the UFO community, both pro and con, scratching their heads and muttering, "What the hell was THAT?!"

For several weeks before it aired, UPN promoted "Alien Abduction: Incident in Lake County" as the long-sought proof that alien abductions are actual events. UPN press releases declared that on Thanksgiving Day, 1997, the McPherson family of Lake County, Minnesota, disappeared without a trace, and that in searching their empty house, authorities found a video made by their teenage son which contained startling footage of the family being terrorized by two bug-eyed space aliens. All ads for the show plainly implied that this was documentary footage. Naturally, with a build-up like that, I said, "This, I gotta see."

As the show unspooled, it became apparent that it had been put together to resemble a documentary: stentorian voice-over announcer describing the footage, interviews with the local TV reporter and sheriff, interview clips with Stanton Friedman, "Skeptic" publisher Michael Shermer, a psychologist and a self-proclaimed "abductee." And as the McPherson video itself played out, it quickly became more than apparent that this was one of the most laughably incompetent pieces of sci-fi hooey to hit the screen since Ed Wood Jr. keeled over dead in his high heels!

The video was an hilariously bogus attempt to cram every alien abduction cliché and cheap horror special effect known to man into one hour of outrageous hokum, complete with "acting" performances about three notches below "Santa Claus Conquers The Martians." I guess the theory was that it would be easier to pull this scam if they used actors who had never been seen before or even acted before (and judging by their performances, who will never act again). This was acting so putrid that you wish they HAD been abducted by aliens.

And lest you think I'm merely assuming they were actors, you should note that at the end of the show -- just after they encouraged viewers to visit [www.upn.com](http://www.upn.com) to voice an opinion on whether or not it was real -- they ran the credits, which included a complete list of names of all the "actors" who played the McPhersons, the sheriff, the reporter, the psychologist, and yes, my favorite credit lines: "Alien 1" and "Alien 2."

As if that weren't enough of a giveaway, the camera-wielding "Tommy McPherson" was played by the only pro in the group, Kristian Ayre, star of Nickelodeon's "Space Cases." (His fan website has a still from "Alien Abduction," which is described as "Kristian's latest project.") It must be depressing to star in a TV series that is so low-rated, most people not only don't recognize you, but can easily believe you've been yanked off the face of the Earth.

The handful of real people who participated in this joke, such as Friedman, have since complained that they never even saw the video, and their comments were lifted out of interviews they granted on the general topic of alien abduction. And you can imagine how the abduction believers on the Internet are reacting. They think this made them look like all-day suckers, and they are threatening a boycott of UPN. Normally, losing a demographic like that wouldn't make much of a dent in a network's ratings, but with UPN, it may well be all the viewers they have. It's certainly their core demographic, at least.

Personally, I wasn't so much angered by this thing as annoyed, amused and puzzled. Annoyed that UPN promoted it as real footage when they obviously knew it was phony, amused by its overripe cheesiness, and puzzled by UPN's motives. They couldn't possibly have thought that anyone would think this banana oil was the real goods, unless they believe that their viewers have the IQs of desk lamps. Afterward, when questioned on this point, a UPN spokesman insisted that the program had always been promoted as "entertainment," a piece of historical revisionism of *Jurassic Park* proportions.

Oh, and one more personal reaction: keen disappointment. I expect things like this to be hoaxes (see *Alien Autopsy*), but I at least expect them to be good hoaxes. A mark of how lousy this one was is that within one week of its original airing on UPN, I heard that it was repeated in a number of cities on the local Fox Network affiliate.

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As a postscript to the above story, a sheriff's spokesman in Lake County, Minnesota, said they had been flooded with calls from everyone short of Mulder and Scully, asking if the McPherson family had ever turned back up. He wanted it made clear that no McPherson family disappeared from Lake County last November, nor has anyone named McPherson lived there since at least 1995. And those particular McPhersons were all eaten by Bigfoot.

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It's been a bad month for psychics. The parent company of the Psychic Friends Network has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, claiming liabilities of \$26 million and assets of only \$1.2 million. And they never saw it coming!

For those of you who don't frequent late night cable TV channels in the upper reaches of the frequency spectrum, I should explain that the PFN was the granddaddy of all those pay-by-the-minute psychic phone lines. They started in 1990, advertising their "services" via infomercials starring Dionne Warwicke (as if anyone would want to take career advice from whoever is counseling Dionne Warwicke). Claiming to have a network of 2,000 authentic, certified psychics (and which government agency would I call to get my psychic certificate?), the PFN tapped into a mother lode of suckers in the early 1990s, earning revenues estimated at up to \$125 million. But since then, the take has fallen drastically.

Lest you become giddy at the thought that a wave of rationality has suddenly swept America, guess again. The PFN's income drop was blamed mostly on poor management (they were too busy giving other people financial advice to think about their own finances) and stiff competition (why take career advice from Dionne Warwicke's psychic when you can get it from the soothsayers guiding the careers of Esther Rolle and LaToya Jackson?).

Still, the solution seems quite obvious. At this writing, the Texas Lottery jackpot stands at \$45 million, more than enough to lift the PFN out of bankruptcy. With 2,000 authentic, certified psychics putting their gifted heads together, divining a measly six winning numbers should be a snap. After all, they've done it for so many other people...

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New York psychic Elizabeth Joyce also had a bad month. She made a mini-splash by predicting on the eve of the State of the Union Address that the speech would be given by Al Gore because Bill Clinton would suffer a nervous breakdown over his sex scandals and resign. As you know, the speech was not given by Al Gore, as was obvious from the fact that it contained only one highly questionable assertion about global warming.

Ms Joyce says she knows what Clinton is going through because she has frequently visited him in the White House by astrally projecting herself to the Oval Office (apparently, Clinton's secretary just waved her spirit right in). So in addition to all the other alleged bodily shenanigans by female visitors to the Oval Office, women are now having out-of-body experiences there, too.



Speaking of the White House, Hillary Clinton once again has political reporters questioning whether she is shrewdly manipulating them or whether she has genuinely misplaced her marbles. And no, she's not chatting with the ghost of Eleanor Roosevelt again.

In explaining how she could so adamantly refuse to accept that her hubby might have been canoodling with toothsome intern Monica Lewinsky, the first lady went on national TV to declare her stout belief that all the scandals that have whirled around him for the past 20 years, including endless tales of extramarital chicken-chasing, were all spawned by a "vast, right wing conspiracy."

It must have warmed the hearts of conspiracy buffs everywhere to learn that one of their own is in such a high place of power, although as usual, I am skeptical...not just of the conspiracy, but skeptical that Hillary even believes it herself (it's a pretty obvious rhetorical device: when you can't refute an accusation, accuse the accuser). But because it came from such a high and respected source, we were treated to several days' worth of predictable self-flagellation by the media, as they debated whether they were being taken in by some vast, right wing conspiracy, or even (horrors!) were part of the cabal themselves!

I'm pleased to report that after several days of navel-gazing, most reporters eventually arrived at the conclusion that *Newsweek* (which broke the original story), Time, CBS, NBC, ABC, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* had not, in fact, been taken over by a shadowy network of fluoride-hating John Birchers. But a few residual effects linger. Nutbars who preach conspiracy dogma now have the official White House seal of approval on their carefully-constructed fantasies. And Rush Limbaugh now has a new premium for subscribers to his newsletter: a free coffee mug that says "Charter member of the Vast Right Wing Conspiracy."

Hillary's unwavering belief in Bill's fidelity naturally leads into this final story from the Wireless Flash news service: according to a new survey, women are more likely to believe in the existence of angels than men. Not that skepticism is winning any battles among either of the sexes: the margins of angel belief were 84 percent for women and "only" 65 percent for men. Granted, the survey may be a bit biased, since it was commissioned by the sponsors of a traveling exhibit of Vatican angel art.

Incidentally, 41 percent of angel believers named *Touched By An Angel* as their favorite "angel show," while 8 percent chose *Charlie's Angels* (I bet those were all men.) Taking this into account, I'd like to suggest a show that both men and women can enjoy equally: "Touched By A Charlie's Angel."

Fridays at midnight, on RWC, the Right Wing Conspiracy channel!

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