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Out of Context

by John Blanton

First time I heard of it I said, "No way anybody's going to get away with that more than about once." Of course, I had been wrong before. We were talking about creationists' use of out-of-context quotes (OOC quotes for short). Here is how it was explained to me: A "creation scientist," not being a real scientist and not doing any real scientific research, has to rely on the works of real scientists to scratch a little credibility. After all, you go before the Mambrino school board and try to tell them that evolution is wrong because "Dr." Carl Baugh said so and so, and they're all going to get a big belly laugh. However, tell them Richard Dawkins, Stephen Jay Gould, or, yes, even Charles Darwin, said something, then they're going to have to listen. The problem is getting these famous scientists to speak out against evolution, let alone say something good for creationism. No problem. You've got OOC quotes. Here's the way it works: That esteemed news journal, the *National Enquirer*, interviews my neighbor Jethro. Jethro tells them:

Me and Betty Jo was drivin' by in the pickup truck when I seen it. I said "Look there, Betty Jo. It's one of them flyin' saucers. And little green men's gettin' out and runnin' around."

Next, Betty Jo commenced slappin' me up side the head. "You idjut," she 'sclaimed. It's jess the TV compny installin' the new satellite dish."

Not wanting to make a dull story any duller, the *NE* publishes the following:

When interviewed by this reporter, Jethro said:

"Me and Betty Jo was drivin' by in the pickup truck when I seen it. I said "Look there, Betty Jo. It's one of them flyin' saucers. And little green men's gettin' out and runnin' around."

This is the best evidence yet for extraterrestrial visitations.

OK, I'm making this all up, but you get the idea. *NE* publishes the interesting part, but conveniently forgets the part about the TV company and the satellite dish. Makes for better reading that way.

The *NE* quote is out of context. It is removed from the context of the full interview with Jethro, and its meaning changes as a result. Not all quotes change meaning when derived of their full context, but some writers use OOC quotes to gain unwarranted credibility for their arguments.

Creationists do this, as well. A lot. Here is how it usually goes:

A respected scientist mentions some problem with radiometric dating. He adds, however, that he has found a way to solve the problem.

The creationist, giving his monthly talk before his anti-science audience notes there is a serious problem with radiometric dating. And you don't have to take his word for it. This famous scientist agrees there is a problem. The creationist conveniently does not mention the solution proposed by the famous scientist. Makes for a more entertaining speech that way.

Don't believe creationists can get away with this more than once? Think again. It's been twelve years since I first encountered the practice, and it's still going strong. Here are some examples.

The grand daddy "creation science" work is the book *The Genesis Flood* by John Whitcomb and Henry Morris. This was first published in 1961 at a time when creationists started feeling the need to appear scientific. The 1995 edition of *TGF* still contains notable OOC quotes from the original edition. ¹ The pertinent background is this:

- One strong piece of evidence for evolution is the fossil record, which shows ancient life forms in the oldest rocks and modern forms only in the younger rocks.
- A geological principle accepted even by creationists is *superposition*. New rocks get deposited on top of old rocks.
- Creationists will insist that fossils of ancient life forms are found in rocks atop modern life forms, because everything was really formed about the same time.
- Scientists point out that this happens when rocks are upset by geological events long after being formed in place. One responsible mechanism is thrust faulting. The Earth's crust gets crammed together sideways, and rocks get folded over, or old rocks get thrust on top of newer rocks.
- In *TGF* Whitcomb and Morris dispute the reality of thrust faulting, at least to the degree geologists claim.

Whitcomb and Morris say:

In every mountainous region on every continent, there seem to be numerous examples of supposedly old strata superimposed on top of young strata. In the absence of definitive structural evidence to the contrary, one would naturally suppose that the lowermost strata must necessarily have been first deposited and, therefore, be older. But the fossils often seem to belie this assumption, and it is the fossils which govern the assigned formation age.
2

Seven pages later, discussing a thrust fault example—the Lewis overthrust—they say:

Ross and Rezak say: "Most visitors, especially those who stay on the roads, get the impression that the Belt strata are undisturbed and lie almost as flat today as they did when deposited in the sea which vanished so many years ago." ³

I guess that looks pretty bad for mainstream geology. Two respected scientists are saying the Belt strata look flat, just the way the creationists expected. But wait. There's more. Here is what Ross and Rezak wrote in their paper:

Most visitors, especially those who stay on the roads, get the impression that the Belt strata are undisturbed and lie almost as flat today as they did when deposited in the sea which vanished so many million years ago. Actually, they are folded, and in certain zones they are intensely so. From points on or near the trails in the park it is possible to observe places where the beds of the Belt series, as revealed in outcrops on ridges, cliffs, and canyon walls, are folded and crumpled almost as intricately as the softer younger strata in the mountains south of the park and in the Great Plains adjoining the park to the east. ⁴

I put Whitcomb and Morris' text in bold and have underlined the word *million*, which they omitted for some obscure reason.

So why didn't Whitcomb and Morris include the remainder of Ross and Rezak's explanation in their book? Were Whitcomb and Morris aware their quoted text seems to imply the Belt strata are not folded, in contradiction to the full text of Ross and Rezak? It seems hard to imagine they weren't aware. However, the creationist authors have consistently denied any attempt to deceive.

In an article titled "The Anti-Creationists" Dr. Morris objects to the drumbeat of complaints from critics. He touches on the matter of OOC quotes:

FACT: The author cited two alleged out-of-context quotations by creationists, one by Dr. Gary Parker supposedly intimating that Dr. Stephen Gould was "championing creationism," the other by this writer supposedly claiming that two evolutionary geologists had agreed that the strata of the great Lewis "overthrust" were all flat and undisturbed. The fact is that we are always careful not to quote out of context. Such quotations have to be brief, for reasons of space, and so cannot give the full scope of the author's thoughts on the subject, but they do not misrepresent their nature and significance. Out of the many thousands of such references that are included in our writings, critics have to search diligently to find even a handful that they can interpret as misleading. Even in the two that were cited, a careful reading of the full context in each case will demonstrate that the reporter was himself guilty of distortion. Dr. Parker made it quite clear that Dr. Gould is a committed evolutionist (in spite of his arguments against certain Darwinian tenets). In the Lewis overthrust discussion, there was ample mention of the physical evidences of disturbances, and the quote (actually appearing only in a minor footnote) certainly did not affect the evidence developed in the particular section against "overthrust" explanation. In no way did it misrepresent the beliefs of the authors quoted.⁵

I'm glad Morris occasionally finds himself short of space. No telling how long he would have gone on if he had a full sheet of paper. Morris' disclaimer notwithstanding, he is hard put to make his point based on what I read in his book. The Ross and Rezak quote is in a footnote, as Morris claims. However, just prior to the reference, the creationists are discussing their argument that the Lewis overthrust does not *appear* to fit the classical description of a thrust fault. They first acknowledge that writer J. L. Kulp⁶ has emphasized evidence of possible sliding at the fault interface. "On the other hand," they continue, "he also quotes a statement acknowledging that the underlying shales appear undisturbed, as follows:" Then they quote the quoted statement of the original author:⁷

The fault plane here (in the Bow valley) is nearly horizontal and the two formations, viewed from the valley, appear to succeed one another conformably. The Cretaceous shales are bent sharply toward the east in a number of places, but with this exception have suffered little by the sliding of the limestone over them, and their comparatively undisturbed condition seems hardly compatible with the extreme faulting which was necessary to bring them into their present position.¹ [sic]

The superscript 1 at the end of the paragraph is in the book, and it points to the footnote at the bottom of page 187 referring to J. L. Kulp's quote of R. G. McConnell. Following the Kulp/McConnell citation in the same footnote is the now famous Ross and Rezak quote.

Morris is correct in saying that the Ross and Rezak text is not representative of all the quotes used in *TGF*. Given that, one is curious as to why the authors used it. They spend over 400 pages promoting a very stupid argument and then stick in something like this to further raise their target profile. Whitcomb and Morris likely have been catching flak over this from the beginning. The book is now in its sixth edition (1964), and my 1998 copy still has the offending text. I am not inclined to give the authors a pass on this. They want to reassure their readers there is little evidence of thrust faulting. They use their own words to reassure their readers. Then they use the words of real scientists to reassure their readers. Only, they *omit* the words of the real scientists that would *not* reassure their readers.

TGF contains an additional quote from the Ross and Rezak paper. Pursuing their argument against mainstream geology, *TGF* cites text that seems to have Ross and Rezak saying evidence of the Lewis overthrust is weak. First the introductory text by Whitcomb and Morris:

Another difficulty with the concept of the Lewis overthrust is that it should have produced a large mass of broken rock in front of it and along the sides. But this has not been found.⁸

Then their quote from Ross and Rezak:

The absence of rubble or breccia is among the compelling reasons that have forced the abandonment of the long-held idea that the Lewis overthrust emerged at the surface and moved over a plain near the front of the present mountains. .

. . Such a slab moving over ground as is now believed to have existed should have scarred and broken the hills and have itself been broken to a greater or less extent, depending on local conditions. No evidence of either of these things has been found (Ross and Rezak, 1959, p. 424).⁹

John G. Solum has provided a more complete context from Ross and Rezak in his *Thrust Faults* entry on the Talk.Origins Web site.¹⁰

The fracture zone that constitutes the Lewis overthrust was inclined upward in an east and northeast direction toward the surface (reference to figure omitted). If it had reached the surface, the forward end of the moving slab of rock above the fracture zone would have been abruptly freed from the resistances that had retarded its progress underground. Motion for a time might have been rapid, comparable with the motion which takes place at the broken ends of a slab of concrete that fails in a testing machine. The eastern end of the overthrust block might have rushed forward tumultuously. If such a thing had occurred, the rock at the eastern end of the moving mass, freed from the confinement from all sides that had formerly held it together, would have broken up; as it advanced over the surface of the ground the edge would have become a great pile of rubble. Masses of broken rock assigned such an origin have been found in front of overthrusts in other regions. **The absence of rubble or breccia is among the compelling reasons that have forced the abandonment of the long-held idea that the Lewis overthrust emerged at the surface and moved over a plain near the front of the present mountains.** Those who held that idea assumed that the ground surface was then level enough so that the overthrust slab could move over it readily. They also thought that the relatively flat surfaces that cap ridges east of the park are remnants of the nearly level topography over which the Lewis overthrust moved after it had reached the surface of the ground.

If the advancing slab of rock had been pushed out into the air, the confining pressures that held it together would have tended to be dissipated. **Such a slab moving over ground as is now believed to have existed should have scarred and broken the hills and have itself been broken to a greater or less extent, depending on local conditions. No evidence of either of these things has been found.** Further, the flat uplands are regarded now as remnants of a surface much younger than, and not directly related to, the overthrust.¹¹

The parts used by Whitcomb and Morris are in bold.

Solum points out that Ross and Rezak are discussing the outmoded idea that the Lewis fault represents motion across the surface of the ground (it does not). In that scenario the rubble and breccia would have been expected. For reasons known only to them Whitcomb and Morris chose to omit the text that explains the idea that Ross and Rezak were trying to get across.

And finally for Morris: In his *Impact* article above Morris complains that "evolutionists" (i.e., real scientists) are implying that he (Morris) represents evolutionists as supporting anti-evolutionary views. He retorts "Dr. Parker made it quite clear that Dr. Gould is a committed evolutionist (in spite of his arguments against certain Darwinian tenets)." When I read this a bell went off in my head.

Your claim that I was really trying to leave the impression that Stephen Gould was a creationist, is mind-boggling. It ought to be embarrassing.¹²

Creationist Don Patton chided me about this matter following a debate in March 2002, during which I pointed out his use of OOC quotes from noted scientists. Morris and Patton are missing the point, maybe deliberately. Their detractors don't claim they are painting real scientists as supporting creationism (or opposing evolution). The claim is that creationists are saying scientific evidence for evolution is faulty or bogus, and quotes from real scientists back them up. We claim that creationists suppress quoted text from scientists that would reveal the true meaning of what the scientists are saying.

Fast forward to 2002.

The Discovery Institute (DI) is based in Seattle, Washington. Its main purpose seems to be to counter teaching evolution in general and to promote "intelligent design" (ID, not to be confused with DI—but go ahead) in particular. The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) provides the background on DI's efforts in relation to the push earlier this year to introduce ID into the Ohio public schools. ¹³

DI provided a "Bibliography of Supplementary Resources for Ohio Science Education" to illustrate that evolution does not have such a solid footing after all. Here is what they had to say about their bibliography:

The following scientific articles, papers, and monographs are drawn from leading journals in the respective disciplines represented: e.g., *Cell* (for molecular biology), *Nature* and *Science* (for general science), *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* and *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* (for evolutionary biology), or from prominent university presses (e.g., Cambridge University Press). The publications represent dissenting viewpoints that challenge one or another aspect of neo-Darwinism (the prevailing theory of evolution taught in biology textbooks), discuss problems that evolutionary theory faces, or suggest important new lines of evidence that biology must consider when explaining origins. ¹⁴

The real intent was more apparent to the NCSE:

NCSE concludes that the only purpose of the Discovery Institute's Bibliography is to mislead members of the Board and of the public about the status of evolution. ¹⁵

The DI bibliography cited 44 published works with selected quotations from each, and NCSE followed up with a questionnaire to authors of those works. Twenty-six authors responded (representing 34 of the publications). None of the respondents agreed that their work constituted support for ID.

For example, DI quotes from Peter J. Lockhart and Sydney A. Cameron, "Trees for bees," *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 16 (2001): 84-88.

The relationships of the four major groups of bees (the highly eusocial honey bees, the stingless bees, the bumble bees, and the solitary orchid bees) presents a classic challenge to evolutionary analysis. Lockhart (Massey University, New Zealand) and Cameron (the University of Arkansas) explain that "molecular and morphological data have suggested strikingly different phylogenetic relationships among corbiculate bee tribes" (pp. 84-85), an unresolved problem that they conclude does not stem from the different methods used by different investigators trying to reconstruct the history of the bees. "Disagreement exists because analyses of [DNA] sequences and morphology suggest different hypotheses, and not because researchers have used different criteria for building and testing evolutionary trees" (p. 87).

Lockhart in his response to NCSE wrote:

I don't think it is a good representation of our work — our work does not present 'a classic challenge to evolutionary analysis'. In our paper we point out that technically it is a hard problem to reconstruct the phylogeny of corbiculate bees regardless of whether you use morphological or molecular data (the reason for this concerns the pattern of radiation — four different lineages diverged in a short period of time a long time ago — given this pattern it is not surprising that different data types might suggest different phylogenies). In our article we do not say that interpretation of the molecular data is right and that interpretation of the morphological data is wrong (or vice versa). Instead we make some suggestions which we believe will help resolve why the different data types suggest different conclusions — we suggest that the bee morphologists relook at the interpretation of some of their data and we also encourage the molecular biologists to determine some additional data which would help test their hypotheses — we suggest that if these things are done then there should be a resolution to the controversy over which phylogeny is correct. We do not doubt that there is a phylogeny — in contrast, the statement by the Discovery Institute suggests that the bee controversy is evidence for absence of phylogeny. No scientist involved in the corbiculate bee debate has ever suggested this to my knowledge. ¹⁶

The attitude of creationists toward this misuse of quotes is odd and puzzling to me. When confronted with evidence of misuse they seldom back down and often claim they have correctly represented the real scientist's viewpoint. Furthermore, creationists even attempt to turn the tables on their accusers. They accuse supporters of evolution of using OOC quotes.

In March 1992 the Richardson, Texas, Foundation for Thought and Ethics (FTE) sponsored a symposium and debate at Southern Methodist University. Phillip Johnson, a leading proponent of "intelligent design" even then, came to debate evolution's staunch supporter Michael Ruse.

Johnson was conversing with FTE founder John Buell during a lull in the festivities, and I used the occasion to ask their opinions on evolution and cosmology. I had my tape recorder in hand and turned on. I must have been impressed by their response, because I went away for something and then came back. By then the recorder was off and in my pocket.

When I resumed the conversation Buell cautioned Johnson about the tape recorder and advised him of the practice of falsely accusing creationists of the using of OOC quotes. He mentioned that it was really evolutionists who employ OOC quotes.

I can tell you right now I was completely flabbergasted. I have since gone to the Internet to look for evolutionists' use of OOC quotes. Here's something I found on the Answers in Genesis Web site:

Plimer again plays fast and loose with the facts when it comes to his 'discussions' of Dr Snelling's 1990 paper on the Koongarra uranium deposits published by the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy in *Geology of the Mineral Deposits of Australia and Papua New Guinea*. That Dr Snelling was asked by Denison Australia Pty Ltd (not Noranda as wrongly asserted by Plimer on p. 248), his former full-time employers for whom he still consults, and the editor of the above-named prestigious volume, speaks volumes in itself for his integrity and for the respect with which he has been held by his peers in the mining industry. Yet Plimer again twists the facts, knowing that his claims and selective quotations out of context (something he has earlier accused creationists of doing) cannot and/or will not be easily checked by the average reader.¹⁷

Skeptic Ian Plimer's book *Telling Lies for God* has apparently castigated the YEC Andrew Snelling for using standard geological terms in his writings, all the while seeking to undermine belief in standard geology. AiG concludes:

Thus this whole charade of Plimer's to try to smear Dr Snelling with duplicity and lack of integrity is totally mischievous. Remember, the terms Archaean and Proterozoic are in the first instance only labels applied to divisions of the geological rock record, and the millions and billions of years rock 'ages' are only imposed on those terms by the geological establishment because of its uniformitarian/evolutionary mindset. It should be noted that in spite of Plimer's caricature and the accusations about Snelling and his Koongarra paper, the two papers by Dr Snelling on the Koongarra area that appear in the *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Creationism* (Pittsburgh, 1994) — one on garnet compositions and regional metamorphism, and the other on false Pb-Pb isochrons — both contain a description of the regional geology and the Koongarra uranium deposit virtually identical to that which Plimer is complaining about in Snelling's 1990 Koongarra paper (as does a paper in our *Creation Ex Nihilo Technical Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1995). The creationist reviewers, editors and conference attendees knew exactly what Snelling was talking about — geological record terminology and uniformitarian 'ages' of rocks as labels and descriptors — and none 'raised an eyebrow', shouted 'duplicity' or doubted Snelling's integrity.¹⁸

It appears the matter of OOC quotes is an open can of worms. A follow-up on creationists' accusations will be very enlightening. Stand by.

References

- 1 John G. Solum. "Thrust Faults," <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/lewis/>. Last updated 7 February 2002
- 2 Whitcomb, John C., and Henry M. Morris. *The Genesis Flood*. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.: Philadelphia, PA, 1961. p. 180
- 3 *The Genesis Flood*, p. 187, quoting Ross, C. P., and Rezak, R. 1959. *The Rocks and Fossils of Glacier National Park: The Story of Their Origin and History*. USGS professional paper 294-K.

4 (Ross and Rezak 1959 p. 420)

5 Henry M. Morris. "The Anti-Creationists," *Impact No. 97*. Institute for Creation Research, Santee, CA. Also at <http://www.icr.org/pubs/imp/imp-097.htm>

6 I must apologize for this, readers. J. L. Kulp was writing in "Flood Geology," in *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, January 1950, pp. 1-15, quoting R.G. McConnell, a Canadian geologist. And this reference is taken from http://www.pathlights.com/ce_encyclopedia/12fos10.htm. "The American Scientific Affiliation was founded in 1941 as a nationwide fellowship of evangelical Christians trained in science." (<http://www.aaas.org/spp/dser/evolution/perspectives/voices/religiou/asa.htm>) McConnell was writing in *Canadian Geological Survey*, 1886, part D, p. 34.

7 *The Genesis Flood*, p. 187.

8 *The Genesis Flood*, p. 187.

9 *The Genesis Flood*, pp. 187-189.

10 Solum.

11 Ross and Rezak, p. 424

12 E-mail from Don Patton, April 2002

13 From the NCSE Web site at

http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/articles/3878_analysis_of_the_discovery_inst_4_5_2002.asp

14 The Discovery Institute at <http://www.discovery.org/viewDB/index.php3?command=view&id=1127&program=CRSC%20Responses>

15 NCSE, op. cit.

16 NCSE, op. cit.

17 AIG Web site at <http://www.answersingenesis.org/docs/3681.asp>

18 Ibid.

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What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

Free energy: APS board speaks out on perpetual motion.

Well, it's not exactly the frontier of physics research, but somebody had to say it. Already this year we've had the Jasker Power System (WN 25 Jan 02), Chukanov Quantum Energy (WN 8 Feb 02), and the Motionless Electromagnetic Generator (WN 5 Apr 02). Not to mention Bubble Fusion (WN 1 Mar 02), hydrino rockets (WN 21 Jun 02), and whatever scam Dennis Lee is running now (WN 3 May 02). So, on Saturday, 22 June, the Executive Board of the American Physical Society unanimously adopted the following statement:

"The Executive Board of the American Physical Society is concerned that in this period of unprecedented scientific advance, misguided or fraudulent claims of perpetual motion machines and other sources of unlimited free energy are proliferating. Such devices would directly violate the most fundamental laws of Nature, laws that have guided the scientific advances that are transforming our world."

Hydrino rockets: Pascal's wager is alive and well at NASA.

According to a story in Wired, NASA's Institute for Advanced Concepts is funding a study to test the feasibility of powering a rocket by the hydrino process. A call to the Director of the IAC in Atlanta confirmed that an engineering professor at Rowan University will conduct the test. According to Randell Mills of BlackLight Power, if ordinary hydrogen atoms make a transition into "a state below the ground state," they become teeny little things called "hydrinos," liberating large amounts of energy. It's all in Mill's "Grand Unified Theory of Classical Quantum Mechanics." Is NASA taking this wacky notion seriously – again? Should we remind NASA that it tested the hydrino claim 10 years ago when BlackLight Power was still called HydroCatalysis? NASA was looking for a way to power a mission to Pluto. Results were "inconclusive." That's NASA talk for "it didn't work."

Global warming: Now that it's official, what do we do next?

When asked about an EPA report acknowledging the climate is growing warmer (WN 7 Jun 02), President Bush said he had "read the report put out by the bureaucracy." If you're wondering who the bureaucracy is, the White House signed off on the report. The Administration proposes we learn to live in a warmer world. In fact, we have little choice; as a result of CO2 in the pipeline, climate models show temperatures continuing to rise for years no matter how we cut emissions. The National Climate Change Vulnerability and Resilience Program, introduced by Rep. J.C. Watts, Jr. (R-OK), offers a plan for adapting to the change.

Mars Odyssey: Fill 'er up for the trip home?

Last week, WN scoffed at media suggestions that water found on Mars by the Odyssey orbiter might someday be used in manned missions to make rocket fuel for the return trip. "Haven't you guys ever heard of electrolysis?" indignant readers asked. Well, yes, we have, but to make that much hydrogen you're going to need a lot of electricity. "No problem," we were told, "the plan is to use solar cells." The plan? We called Jim Garvin, NASA's head scientist for Mars Exploration. "We have no plans to find water in the form of ice and convert it into anything," he snorted. But, you might ask, is it a practical idea? Alas, the hydrogen found by Odyssey is in the polar regions. Elsewhere, things look pretty dry. "OK, so they'll send along a nuclear reactor." Good idea, but you'd better toss in a backhoe too. Even in the polar regions the water is a foot or two below the surface and it's in the form of frozen mud, maybe 20% water. So where does the media get hold of these ideas? They must be coming from the Mars lobby, which is dedicated to underestimating the difficulty.

Global warming: "You've come a long way, baby."

In a report to the United Nations, the US acknowledged that the climate is growing warmer. Moreover, the required EPA report, www.epa.gov/globalwarming/publications/car/, identifies carbon dioxide pollution of the atmosphere from human activity, as a possible culprit.

(Christy Fernandez contributed to this week's What's New.)

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Skeptical Ink

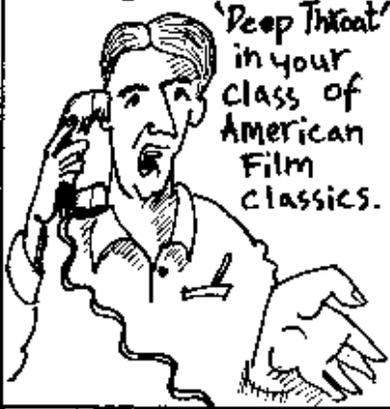
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A PLEDGE PARABLE

Mr. Schulz, my daughter tells me you've been showing the movie

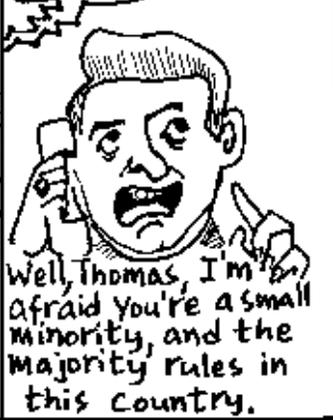


'Deep Throat' in your class of American Film classics.

Yes, Mr. Thomas. It's a great bit of American history. All the kids love it.



Mr. Schultz, I think it's a great bit of American trash, and my daughter finds it insulting to watch it.



Well, Thomas, I'm afraid you're a small minority, and the majority rules in this country.

I straightened it out with the school, Cathy. You don't have to watch if you don't want to.



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