



Selected articles from
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TBS's First 25 Years: A Highlight Retrospective

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

This issue, our 100th, closes the book on 25 years of *Tampa Bay Skeptics Report*. Hanging in my home office is a poster onto which are pasted handwritten notes of congratulations from numerous TBS members, some quite clever and humorous (such as Don Addis' little caricature of me with the caption, "Now Playing: The Mad Dr. Posner in 'The Thing Who Wouldn't Quit'"), presented to me at our June 1998 meeting in celebration of TBS's 10th anniversary. And on my *office* office desk proudly sits the pen set/plaque that accompanied the poster. Who would have dreamed (or nightmared) that the mad doctor et al. would still be plugging away after 15 more years?

One of the highlights of TBS's first year was a lecture by astrologer [Janet Sciales](#), a major local media celebrity at the time. Sciales had joined TBS briefly, telling me that she agreed with us about "psychic" power and almost everything else (except astrology). But she quickly learned that we require more than anecdotal evidence for such claims (see [this page](#), with link to [the video](#) of her priceless 50-second tirade against yours truly during the Q&A following her lecture), and in later years she would even advertise herself as a "psychic" astrologer. And at the end of year one, TBS hosted a Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI; formerly CSICOP) Executive Council seminar, which was attended by such luminaries as Paul Kurtz, James Randi, Philip Klass, Joe Nickell, Ray Hyman and Ken Frazier.

Our next year was ushered in by the Tarpon Springs ["Weeping Icon" fiasco](#), which garnered TBS much publicity, as did our [first "\\$1,000 Challenge"](#) that July. 1989 also marked our first major article about ["psychic detective" Noreen Renier](#) and her legal battles with skeptic John Merrell, whom she had successfully sued for libel. And year two ended with our exposé of consumer advocate [Chuck Harder's For the People](#) radio show's (and its companion magazine's) bizarre UFO-related (among other) conspiracy theories, for which TBS and I were threatened (but never served) with a similar lawsuit.

Our coverage of the famous [Gulf Breeze UFO case](#), and of the claims of "Face on Mars" promoter [Richard Hoagland](#), highlighted year three, which ended with our [addressing a meeting](#) of the local chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, which host Mel Martin, then Ch. 10's news director, later called "the best SPJ program in many years." The next year included our first report on ["psychic detective" John Monti](#) and his futile efforts to locate Tiffany Sessions, the 20-year-old University of Florida student whose disappearance while jogging in Gainesville remains a mystery. And the following issue's lead story, ["The Incredible Gall of 'The Amazing Kreskin'"](#), revealed how he had fooled Ch. 13's Kathy Fountain with simple parlor tricks and had failed to take us up on our "Challenge," which we had upped to \$10,000 just for him.

The TBS Executive Council troika made its [first joint appearance](#) on Kathy Fountain's show in 1993, featuring a live "\$1,000 Challenge" open to all in the TV (by phone) and studio audience, which included several "psychics." Somehow, the laws of *physics*, rather than *psychics*, managed to prevail once again. In 1994 we reported on the devilish ["Barney Hoax"](#), in which John Bunch, a graduate psychology student at the University of South Florida, created the fictitious persona of Luscious M. Bromley, born-again founder of Citizens Concerned About Barney, who ranted that the purple dinosaur character was leading children down the road to drugs, immorality and Satanism. My second stint on an SPJ panel was with Bunch and several of the many reporters who had fallen hard for the hoax.

In our Summer 1994 issue, [I recounted](#) how a producer with the NBC weekly program *Now*, fronted by Tom Brokaw and Katie Couric, had rushed me a copy of Dr. Larry Dossey's *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*, for me to critique and then submit to her the sort of sound bites that I would feel comfortable uttering on air. She later told me that she agreed with my skeptical comments, but the network ultimately decided not to formally interview me (they did briefly use another skeptic), electing instead to hype the book's miraculous claims and air the show during the week leading up to Easter. At least my *TBSR* [review of *Healing Words*](#) got nationally published in *Skeptical Inquirer*. A December 25 *Lakeland Ledger* article about miracles, which got picked up nationally, led to my being invited to appear on the April 14, 1995, edition of *Oprah*, but I did the right thing by directing the producer instead to CSI's [Joe Nickell](#) (*Looking for a Miracle*).

As a result of our reporting about Noreen Renier, in May 1996 I was invited by a producer for A&E's *The Unexplained* to appear in [an episode](#) about Renier and the Williston, Florida, police department's search for a missing man, and a [compiled version](#) of our related *TBSR* articles appeared in

Skeptic magazine and later as a chapter in the *Skeptic Encyclopedia of Pseudoscience*. And Christmas 1996 was heralded by a visit from the Virgin Mary on several windows of a Clearwater office building, with the international publicity resulting in thousands of pilgrims from across the globe arriving to pray for healings. Our investigation revealed similar colorful stains (one of which we dubbed "Buddha") on the building's other windows, wherever the shrubbery was close enough to them to allow the sprinklers' mineral residue to accumulate in the glass' somewhat porous coating layer. And the *St. Petersburg Times* (now *Tampa Bay Times*) found a 1994 photo in which the "Mary" stain, though largely hidden by palm trees (which were removed just before Christmas 1996), could be seen even back then.

The full story (with video) of our September 1998 "\$1,000 Challenge" of "psychic/prophet" Virginia Levy can be [seen here](#). The atmosphere was friendly, with much humorous banter, and Levy praised the protocols as well as our professional demeanor. Unfortunately for her, she failed the test, and the years have taken a toll on her memory, as demonstrated by her viciously false and defamatory accusations in an August 8, 2008, [St. Pete. Times article](#), which necessitated a [corrective letter](#) from Terry Smiljanich and myself.

The Spring 1999 *TBSR* (and the July/August *Skeptical Inquirer*) contained [my debunking](#) of a supernatural acupuncture claim by Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld in one of his books and in *Parade* magazine. Rosenfeld, a nationally known cardiologist and media figure, was *Parade's* medical editor. Our Winter 1999-2000 issue reported upon [another "\\$1,000 Challenge" failure](#) (dowsing), as well as [my appearance](#) on an MSNBC program hosted by David Gregory, debating against "psychic medium" George Anderson and TV personality Linda Ellerbee.

Our additional reporting about Richard Hoagland resulted in a [cover story](#) in the Nov./Dec. 2000 *Skeptical Inquirer*, which drew a [fiery response](#) on Hoagland's website, to which I [replied](#) in S.I.'s May/June 2001 issue. And on the night of May 25/26, 2001, Hoagland, along with radio host Art Bell, [lied liberally on Coast to Coast A.M.](#) about that follow-up article. Later, as we reported in Fall 2001, Indianapolis radio host Bob Prince invited Hoagland and me to be on his show -- I immediately accepted; Hoagland wouldn't even return Prince's calls. **[February 27, 2020: Any readers who have recently been unable to find Richard Hoagland's "enterprisemission.com" website should try adding an "s" in the URL (changing "mission" to "missions"), as I have done in this paragraph's link. Per a January 23 post on his Facebook page, Hoagland "recently moved the site to a new hosting company and links have been broken." On the next line he adds that the site has now been "fixed," but that is not the case as of today's date. If he does "fix" his site before I then "refix" this paragraph's link to it, try removing the "s" from the URL.]**

Having seen some of our skeptical reporting about the healing power of distant prayer, a 20/20 producer flew me to New York in May 2000 for an hour-long interview. She was so impressed with my responses that she decided on the spot (or so she told me) that my comments would serve as the focal point of her upcoming piece. [When it ultimately aired](#) 15 months later on 20/20's stepchild *Downtown*, it was dominated by New Ager [Deepak Chopra](#), with my cautionary commentary reduced to 20 seconds near the end. The segment's correspondent was [Dr. Michael Guillen](#), a 1997 recipient of the James Randi Educational Foundation's ["Pigasus Award"](#) for his "indiscriminate promotion of pseudoscience and quackery."

As we recounted in Spring 2003, TBS had received inquiries the previous December 27 from several media outlets, including the *Miami Herald* and Newhouse News Service, which had found on the Web our reporting about the *Downtown* debacle. Their interest was in the gullible Guillen, who earlier that day [had participated](#) in a press conference in which the Realian cult had announced -- falsely, of course -- that they had successfully cloned a human being. Guillen would shortly thereafter disparage CSI (then CSICOP), which he called "an extremist group," during an interview on Fox News Channel. He added, "I have no trouble with criticism when it's voiced honestly and constructively. But in this case, this is a group, for example, [that believes] programs like *The X-Files* are a menace to society and should be pulled off the air. These are folks who don't necessarily defend the truth, but a certain point of view [and] I don't really take [their] criticism very seriously." Guillen was as accurate with his *X-Files* comment as he had been in defending the cult -- not only had CSI never taken such a stance about the show, its creator had been almost fawningly featured at one of CSI's national conferences.

In year 16 we [raked Court TV](#) (now truTV) over the coals for the first time (of several) over its untrue hyping of "psychic detectives," including Noreen Renier. Later that year, [TBS merged](#) with Center for Inquiry-Florida (now CFI-Tampa Bay) as a "Special Interest Group." A couple years later, our Summer 2005 issue featured [my review](#) of Renier's memoir, *A Mind for Murder: The Real-Life Files of a Psychic Investigator*, in which I praised its writing style if not the veracity of its content. Two issues later, [we took Tampa General Hospital to task](#): "When a major American hospital like TGH treats its patients with the likes of 'Reiki' and 'theurapeutic touch,' the line is crossed between providing rational medical care and calling in the 'Medicine Man.'" And by the time our next issue was out with [the story](#), Berkley/Penguin had been forced to cease publication of Renier's book, its two chapters attacking John Merrell being in violation of a 1992 legal settlement between Renier and Merrell in which both parties had agreed to never again publicly "diminish and/or disparage the other's reputation." (The book would reappear two years later, from another publisher, sans those chapters.)

Thanks to someone having made a recording of her session with "psychic medium" George Anderson and turning it over to TBS, we were able to [dissect his "20 Questions" act](#) in our Summer 2006 issue. Nearly three years later, after playing it cool for a while, we published [my essay](#), "Confessions of a 'Holocaust Denier,'" in which I explained the reasons why applying critical scrutiny to global warming alarmism seems to me to be a "principled [scientific] position" not deserving of comparison to Holocaust denial. Three issues later, [I critiqued](#) the efforts of Center for Inquiry's Office of Public Policy in Washington, D.C., to denigrate scientists skeptical of global warming alarmism. CFI had initially declared such scientists as "fake," but later dropped that and simply accused them (except for about 20%) of not having "published peer-reviewed climate research." Our article pointed out that according to Prof. William Schlesinger, a lead author of the U.N.'s IPCC report (though he offered the figure as simply his best "guess"), only "something in the order of 20% [of the IPCC scientists] have some dealing with climate" (see/listen [here](#), beginning at 3:35 of this segment of the video). The same issue of *TBSR* carried [our 'toon tribute to Don Addis](#), whose world-class cartoons had graced our pages from our first year until his death in November 2009.

In our Fall 2010's [zillionth update](#) on Renier v. Merrell (and vice versa), I commented upon a judge's outrageous overreach in ruling that Merrell will be forced to pay Renier a penalty of \$30,000 if "any mention of Merrell's name" were to appear in a book that yours truly was in the process of writing about Renier! My rejoinder was, "If [the judge has] a problem with it, he can stick it where the moon don't shine." Our Spring 2012 cover shows [Renier regaling an audience](#) with her dubious stories at the University of Arkansas' Clinton School of Public Service. And the following issue details [her loss of two appeals](#) in her ongoing litigation, which may continue until hell freezes over, which, in our last issue as well as on page 7 of

this one (in my response to Dr. Clifford's page 3 article) I imply is a possibility, should the current [16-year global warming plateau](#) portend a change of direction.

Not to mention (though I will anyway) Terry Smiljanich's insightful columns, deserving of a Website of their own (he told me years ago that he planned to create one), a ring binder full of newspaper articles about or quoting TBS, [additional "\\$1,000 Challenges."](#) our numerous other [media and community appearances](#), and our handling of many assorted inquiries via phone and mail from the press and public. All in all, not a shabby quarter century of work.

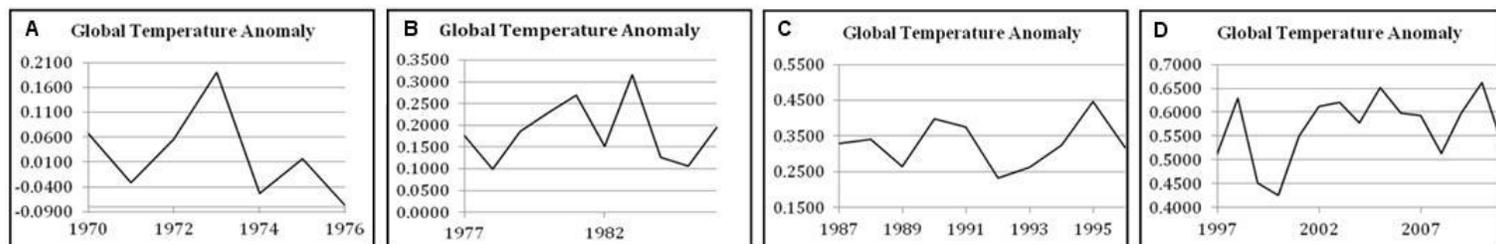
Use Long-term Trends to Evaluate Climate Change

By Paul Clifford

In last issue's article "[Revisiting Global Warming](#)," Gary Posner presented the viewpoint that the earth's warming trend may have plateaued. A feature of the article was a graph from the *London Daily Mail* showing that global temperatures had not risen between 1997 and August 2012.

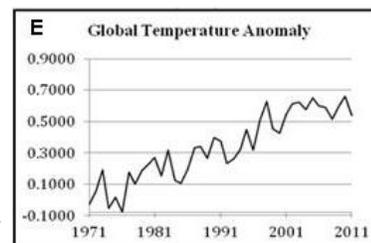
There are reasons to be skeptical of this argument. The first is that climate change is a long-term phenomenon and looking at data over a brief period of time, even a decade or more, can be misleading. For example, in the following graphs I have plotted global land and ocean temperature anomalies by year for various time periods from 1970 to 2011. The global temperature anomaly used here is the departure of the global land and ocean temperature for a year from the average for the period 1901 to 2000. The data were obtained from the National Climatic Data Center. This analysis is similar to "The Escalator" on [this SkepticalScience Web page](#) but is presented in a different manner.

From 1970 through 1976, there was an apparent global cooling trend (see graph A). From 1977 through 1986, 1987 through 1996, and 1997 through 2011, global temperature apparently remained constant (graphs B, C and D respectively).



Thus, in any one of these periods it would have been possible to make the argument that global temperature increases had ceased. However, if one looks at a graph of global temperature anomalies over the entire period, a significant warming trend is apparent (graph E).

Second, year-to-year temperature variations are the result of a variety of phenomena. For example, El Niño years, in which the sea surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific are unusually warm, can lead to significant positive anomalies such as that for 1998. By contrast, La Niña years, in which the same sea surface temperatures are unusually cool, can lead to significant reductions in the anomalies, such as those that occurred in 1999 and 2008.



Volcanic eruptions also can significantly disrupt global climate by injecting particles into the atmosphere. This can lead to short-term cooling. As a result, year-to-year variations in temperature can be significant and a linear increase should not be expected. Apparent plateaus and short-term cooling are to be expected due to these and other factors. Failure to interpret these plateaus and short-term cooling in terms of various phenomena and considering them separately from longer-term trends can lead to misleading conclusions.

Third, a man-made increase in temperature can be isolated mathematically from the other phenomena that effect the climate. The results of this type of analysis indicate that man-made temperature increases have continued over the past 16 years. An excellent, easily understood video presenting these results is available on [this SkepticalScience Web page](#) along with a detailed written explanation of the methodology used.

Here, too, the results should be viewed in terms of a long-term perspective. Sixteen years is not sufficient to determine if there is a long-term trend. However, when viewed in the perspective of temperature trends for the past hundred years, the results are consistent with man-made climate change.

[Dr. Clifford is a retired chemist with more than 40 years of experience as a research scientist, project and program manager, and senior executive of scientific and engineering organizations. He holds a Ph.D. in organic chemistry and an M.B.A. from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Most recently, he served as Executive Director of the Florida Industrial and Phosphate Research Institute.]

Letters to the Editor

Editor: I read [your nicely written article](#) on global warming (in the last issue) three times and still don't know what to make of it. Just heard on the news that bush fires in New South Wales, Australia, are the worst in recorded history. Temps are so high they had to add two new colors (purple and pink) to their meteorological temperature charts. Hope your cooling kicks in soon, but I stand by what I wrote in my Spring 2011 *TBSR* article.

--Valerie Grey
Nokomis
hvgrey@cs.com

Editor: I read last issue's article on global warming with interest. The page 1 graph showing temperature variations relative to a 14-degree C. point was not especially compelling, coming as it does from a London tabloid. It seems that the decidedly imprecise nature of climate measurement tends to breed quite a large family of interpretations. And, because it is dynamic and subject to changes and pressures from many sources, it does not easily lend itself to absolute and proscriptive definition. But since the data over longer periods tend to suggest strongly upward growth trends, within the previous millennium at any rate, and moreover are consistent with the industrial tide of CO2 and other greenhouse gasses input to the atmosphere, it should be taken quite seriously. This is an extremely complex phenomenon with a variety of internal as well as exogenous factors interacting in mechanisms that are difficult to recognize, not to mention describe. All this however, leaves us with certain gross measurements over time that seem to be quite suggestive of great peril to humanity, and therefore worthwhile to intensify our studies.

Please [see here](#) for some supportive long-term data from the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies. It may have a bit more weight than some of the politically contentious information from the conservative *Daily Mail*, despite the disclaimers noted above.

But as is clearly evident from the activity and the body of science, every evolving proposition needs its critics. It is the test of good ideas and bad. Global warming as projected and described by many has the potential to be a human catastrophe of such proportion as to call into question the continued existence of our species, not to mention the biosphere. If ever there was a consequential proposition that I would want to be wrong, it is clearly this one.

While record extremes have been given quite a bit of publicity in the last few months, it should be noted that in climatology it is not the day, week, month, year or decade that counts, as much as the compelling evidentiary weight of accumulating contextual time. Much work has been done to establish the climatic parameters in the larger measures of century, millennium, and epoch providing a framework for a more reliable picture of our atmosphere's historical activity. With this essential information, we can effectively utilize refinements in the instruments and statistical methods involved with climatological research in the present, as well as the advances of computer modeling that offer us greater confidence in more recent data as indicators of future conditions. While certainty necessarily remains elusive, the evidence continues to suggest ever more compelling reasons for concern.

I am not a climatologist (I don't even play one on TV), but I have been interested in this question since the mid-seventies. As an amateur, my confidence in what is now the most widely accepted view of climate science, i.e., vast and rapid systemic change, rests largely on proponent articles in the institutional science periodicals, *Scientific American*, *Science* magazine, *New Scientist*, *Science Weekly*, *Nature*, and others, the content of which are often synopsisized from specialized peer-reviewed journals.

Recently, however, the popular media have taken notice over the past decade, and as is so often the case, have been less than helpful in depicting the issue in terms of political football, rather than presenting a more objective picture of our situation. Since a change in human behavior appears to be an essential step in dealing with what appears to be a crisis, politics enters the picture. A way must be found to inform the people that does not arouse less rational, more destructive responses. This is where the skeptical, rationalist, humanist movement can play an important role. Supposing the accuracy of some worst-case climate scenarios, even if the time for effective action is very late, it is still possible to subdue the most egregious outcome if we can find ways to act rationally. Is this a critical moment for the next step in the evolution of human behavior? Now that our knowledge has allowed us a perception of our own folly in a natural world that is imposing harsh limits on such behavior, we are now responsible for saving ourselves.

Thanks for keeping the pot boiling on this extremely serious issue. Science is well served in keeping a challenging counterpoint alive.

--Jim Peterson, President
[Tampabay PostCarbon Council](#)
jamestp@metrodirect.net

Editor's replies: Jim, a longtime member of TBS, is obviously a lot more certain of global warming's causes and potential future disastrous effects than I am. On his referenced page, I don't recall having previously seen the graph titled "Land-Ocean Surface Temperature: Running Means" (beneath the first cluster). Note that the orange 60-month running mean (5-year moving average) had already peaked by the beginning of 2005, confirming the "London tabloid" report of no net global warming since 2000, which is the only fact in my article that his letter seems to imply was dubious.

And though many still do deny the temperature plateau, Dr. Clifford's article acknowledges its existence and endeavors to explain its lack of significance in terms of the longer-term trend. He is, of course, correct that the plateau does not mean that the 20th century's global warming trend will not reemerge at plateau's end, whether that be next year, next decade, or whenever. IPCC chairman Rajendra Pachauri [has recently proclaimed](#) that the plateau could last "30-40 years at least" without breaking the uptrend.

Further, when, say, a century-long graph of stock-market averages is viewed in retrospect, periods identified as so-called "bull markets" can contain not merely plateaus, but frightful downward retracements of up to 50% of the preceding rises. But, again, only in retrospect, after values have once again exceeded where they were when the plunges began, can one choose to interpret the downtrends as having been nothing more than blips in the longer-term uptrends.

Given the degree to which this issue has been monetized and politicized, if the current temperature plateau were to be followed by a prolonged period of significant cooling, I suspect that all along the way down we would continue to hear that anyone opining the drop to be anything other than a mere blip in the inexorable global warming trend is a science-challenged promoter of disinformation (or worse). As for the video referenced in Dr. Clifford's article, it sure seems persuasive, though a source (who requests that I not name him here) has cautioned me that this site is not beyond employing "dirty tricks" in its advocacy. I am attempting to ascertain the veracity of that video.

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