



Selected articles from
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TBS in Transition

By [Terry A. Smiljanich](#)

Tampa Bay Skeptics was founded 25 years ago, through the considerable efforts of [Gary Posner](#). He has continued those efforts ever since, putting out a quarterly newsletter, finding material to publish in the newsletter, keeping track of TBS finances, maintaining an archive of TBS materials, maintaining our website, setting up quarterly meetings and finding interesting content for those meetings (with much help in recent years from [Jack Robinson](#)), and generally making sure that TBS doesn't just go the way of so many special interest groups, i.e, starting off with great passion and then just petering out after a year or two.

Times have changed over the past quarter century. Print media is dying and being replaced by social media. "Clubs" are not popular with younger generations. The Internet instantly provides information tailored to your particular interests, together with any opinion one wants to seek out to confirm your particular bias.

At a recent symposium held at the University of Florida discussing the new look of higher education (mainly due to online courses), a student spokesman, working on an advanced degree in computer engineering, was asked where he primarily gets his news information. He quickly answered, "On Twitter, like almost everyone I know."

From an initial peak of about 120 members, TBS has suffered a slow but steady decline in paid membership, currently standing at around 40, and lately our quarterly meetings have been sparsely attended. At the last meeting, Gary and I waited to see if *anyone* else would show up. One intrepid soul did. He offered his opinion that clubs and meetings just aren't very popular anymore, and that TBS needed to enter the world of social media.

He was right. I have recently created a Facebook page ([Facebook.com/TampaBaySkeptics](https://www.facebook.com/TampaBaySkeptics)) and a

Twitter account (Twitter.com/TampaBaySkeptic [no "s" at end]) for TBS, both admittedly in their incipient stages. And given that our website contains much of the material that is published in our newsletters, the following questions arise: Why keep putting out a hard-copy newsletter when everyone can just go to the website and read much of its content? And if we stop publishing it, why continue to require dues from members when most of our expenses relate to the printing and mailing of the newsletter? What does it mean anymore to be a "member"? Isn't it just a subscription?

For all of these reasons, TBS is going to have to change with the times. Our upcoming meeting on September 28 will consist largely of a discussion of these matters, and interested members are encouraged to attend and express their opinions.

As readers will see from Gary Posner's editorial that follows, he is not only weary of carrying all of the weight, he is also discouraged by what he sees as political and economic trends in America, and is no longer as excited about beliefs in paranormal silliness.

Gary and I have been compatriots in this TBS endeavor ever since I became Chairman in our second year. Although we agree about the importance of rational inquiry and the proper approach to examination of paranormal claims, we couldn't be further apart when it comes to politics. My own summary of political events over the past 25 years would look very different than his, whether it's the problems with the Supreme Court these days, liberal bias in the media, fiat money, or the course of presidential politics and the national debt since the 1980s. As for whether humanity can be blamed for global warming, and the extent to which those who express skepticism of the current scientific consensus are being denigrated and shamed into silence, we again disagree, though amicably.

What cannot be denied is that Gary is now far more concerned over political and economic trends than with, as he calls them, "comparatively trivial superstitions and such." Although I am not in the same place as he, without his Herculean efforts TBS cannot go on as before.

I have volunteered to try and keep our new Facebook and Twitter accounts engaging. Gary will keep the website alive and perhaps publish a more occasional newsletter. Clearly, however, it is time to take a good look at TBS and see where we are heading. Again, we hope to see many of you on September 28.

EDITORIAL: "All Good Things . . ."

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

When TBS was founded in the 1980s, America was vibrantly emerging from a period of double-digit inflation and unemployment. "Made in America" entrepreneurial spirit was soaring. Thanks in large part to a vigorous press holding the White House's feet to the fire, and the President's desire to befriend and reach compromises with his colleagues across the aisle, our democracy never seemed healthier, and the Berlin wall was about to crumble, along with the Kremlin's threat to the U.S. A seemingly endless epoch of peace and prosperity seemed in sight. Whether or not someone believed that a strange light in the sky was an interplanetary spacecraft is what really got my juices roiling.

But the fourth estate is now in foreclosure. Rather than speaking truth to power, for most of the past five years the Washington press corps has done little more than take dictation and cheerlead. A courageous investigative journalist for CBS News feels [pressured to tone down](#) her reporting about one of the "phony scandals" currently besieging the Administration and her personal and work computers get [hacked](#) (she believes she knows by whom but the investigation continues). Radical Islam replaces the Soviets as not only a mortal enemy of the U.S. but an existential threat to Western civilization (once they begin securing their arsenal of WMDs). Whether or not someone decides to visit an astrologer seems far less important to me now than it did back when.

The vote of one man, usually Anthony Kennedy (though it was John Roberts re: Obamacare), now generally decides some of the most important matters facing our society. The Founders would never have constructed, nor the states ratified, a Constitution conferring such power to one individual, or even to the entire Supreme Court, which was envisioned to be the weakest of the three "coequal" branches. Nor, when they decreed that only the Congress shall "coin money," did they sanction that the dollar (made of precious metal), or the more portable dollar note (an IOU redeemable for precious metal), could be replaced by the Federal Reserve Note, created by the gazillions out of thin air by a private bank cartel in its well-intentioned attempts to attenuate the normal ups and downs of interest rates and business cycles, but by so doing enabling profligate spending, guaranteeing debasement of the currency, and teeing us up for one hell of a day of reckoning. That some lady claims to have ESP doesn't seem to rankle quite as much anymore.

China is lobbying to replace the dollar as the world's reserve currency with its own. Should this happen, it might suddenly cost us several precious metal coins, or a boatload of Federal Reserve Notes, for the proverbial loaf of bread. Until I saw [60 Minutes on August 11](#), I considered this a not-too-distant inevitability. But it turns out that China's economy is largely bogus. Yes, they are now flooding the world with a surplus of affordable goods. But they are also constructing about 20 new "ghost cities" -- not mere residential developments or industrial parks, but full-sized cities -- each year, congested with upscale high-rises, all of which are eerily devoid of any occupants. You see, China forbids its citizens from investing beyond its borders, and its interest rates are too low to generate enticing returns, so as its migration toward capitalism generates wealth for its formerly impoverished masses, they are being enticed by glossy brochures to put their savings into real estate boondoggles that are thus metastasizing despite the absence of a pool of potential inhabitants. China's version of the "American Dream" is a one-way ticket to destitution, and when its economy implodes, watch out! With the world becoming more bizarrely irrational than any paranormalist, my enthusiasm to debunk pyramid power has largely gone kaput.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has announced that 2012 was "among the 10 warmest years on record." That it was also one of the [coolest of the current decade](#) was not, and cannot, be acknowledged, except in whispers by white-sheeted "Holocaust deniers." George Washington, in his farewell address, warned of the dangers of political parties, among them the tendency to foster unnecessary antagonisms among groups and the raising of false alarms. Hopefully the scientific community will not devolve into polarized camps of Sciencrats vs. Republitists, but I fear that we are already on our way. Somehow, the "Face on Mars" farce fails to fascinate me as much as before.

I could go on and on, but suffice it to say that after 25 years of hard labor as your humble editor and

principal writer of *TBS Report*, I am growing increasingly weary of worrying about comparatively trivial superstitions and such. And with no enthusiastic successors in sight, it appears that our hard-copy newsletter may go the way of so many other publications. But even if we do not continue to publish regularly, we may surprise you with periodic mailings. And our website, which I will continue to maintain, is being complemented by new [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts, administered (at least initially) by Terry Smiljanich, that will carry on the work of Tampa Bay Skeptics well into the future. As we have said before, stay tuned!

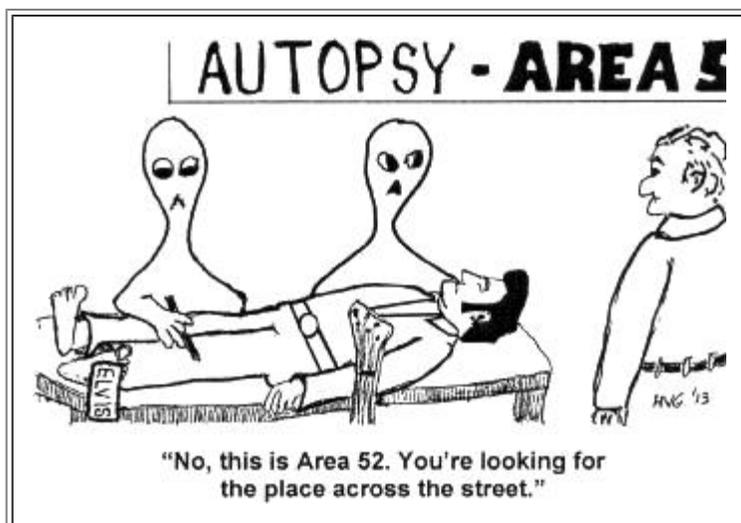
Naples "UFO" Evaporates

On August 7, WBBH-TV 2 in Fort Myers [ran a story](#) about a "UFO" caught on a condo's surveillance footage two nights earlier in Naples. The video, which enthralled the condo's security officer and residents as well as Ch. 2 reporter Rick Ritter, and had become "the talk of Naples," shows a few smeary, shape-shifting lights seemingly hovering over a swimming pool for nearly 30 minutes before disappearing.

Ritter sent the video to the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). But former TBS member James Conrad, co-author of *Filmmaker's Dictionary*, who kept TBS closely apprised of the ongoing saga, suspected an obvious prosaic solution and requested an expert opinion from [replacementdome.com](#), a supplier of domes for security cameras. Their conclusion: ". . . what our engineer and quality manager both see is simply a rain drop that obscures the view and refracts light."

Even MUFON, though its official report is riddled with errors, has come to the same conclusion. But Debralee Thomas, the condo's security officer, still rejects this simple explanation.

Snippets



Area 51, where our study of extraterrestrial spaceships is alleged to have resulted in many of mankind's most remarkable technological breakthroughs, and our "alien autopsies" have perhaps led to miraculous medical discoveries, has finally been officially acknowledged to exist. Documents recently released by the CIA reveal that this portion of the dry Groom Lake bed in Nevada, about 125 miles northwest of Las Vegas, has been the home for top-secret military activities such as the U-2 spy-plane programs. But, sadly, there is still no official admission that the UFO buffs have been right all along. "We're hoping the CIA is leading up to [ET] disclosure," says Audrey Hewins, who runs a support group in Maine for "abductees" like herself. "I'm thinking that they're probably testing the waters now." But I doubt it, if only because the lake bed is dry!

(A.P. via Tampa Tribune, August 17)

Tampa Tribune correspondent Paul Guzzo informs us, "Just because it's a superstition doesn't mean it isn't so." With tongue not obviously near cheek, Guzzo's piece begins, "The world is rife with superstitions [e.g., rabbit's foot, black cat] that can easily be dismissed by skeptics. . . . However, sometimes events occur that suggest a superstition isn't so ridiculous. In the past decade, two historic Ybor City talismans have proven to have some substance." Guzzo then tells the story of the clock tower atop the J.C. Newman Cigar Factory, which was built in 1910. "Besides being the official timekeeper of Ybor City, [it] also was thought to be the district's genie and good luck charm . . . [keeping the city] safe, looking over the community like a magical guard in the sky." That is, until its bell was shut off in 1954 after a nearby resident complained that it kept her baby awake at night. Lo and behold, within a few years, the urban renewal program that was supposed to revitalize the city instead severed it in two by the construction of the Interstate highway. Only after the bell was issued a reprieve in 2002 did the development tide begin to turn: "Ybor's clock was silenced and the district was destroyed; when it was turned back on, the district was restored."

The second talisman was a wooden nail keg originally owned by former Tampa Mayor Dick Greco's father. "According to legend [which began in 1940], if a political candidate sat on the nail keg, he was guaranteed victory." And indeed it worked for a succession of politicians, including (in addition to some others) two governors and two mayors, one being Dick Greco himself in several successful campaigns. But after losing the keg after a move to a new home in 2010, Greco's 2011 election effort was a bust.

(Tampa Tribune, April 14)

Another Stinky "Skunk Ape" Video

No, it doesn't look much more clear in the original [iPhone video](#). But according to Mike Falconer and his son, they spotted, and captured for posterity (image-wise) what they believe is the elusive Florida "Skunk Ape."

The grainy video was, so they say, shot on March 2 in the Myakka River State Park in Sarasota County, after the duo spotted in the distance, and attempted to approach, an ape-like creature of undetermined olfactory offensiveness. And other curiosity seekers are said to have stopped their cars along the nearby road to catch a peek, or a whiff, of the famous beastie.

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