



The North Texas

Skeptic

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Challenge activity

by John Blanton

You may know this already, but the NTS, in an effort to imitate the Amazing Randi, has an on-going Paranormal Challenge. The Challenge is for the demonstration of paranormal abilities or some paranormal phenomenon to be designated later. Here we take the term *paranormal* to mean something that contravenes natural law. In short, it's something that can't be done. And, we will pay \$10,000 for a successful demonstration.

All right, our prize is not \$1 million like Randi's, but it is what we can afford. Five underwriters, most of whom are actually NTS members, provide the financial backing, so no NTS funds are at stake.

We've had this up for over ten years, but early on the economy must have been in great shape, because we received practically no response to our offer. Times have changed, and so, apparently has the economy. Last year we received two very serious contenders for the prize, as we reported in previous issues of the newsletter.

Jagdish Maheshri had, we thought, an excellent approach for testing his theory about astrology, and we jumped on his suggestion to set up a test. Alas, his test, though scientifically valid, required resources beyond our control. We had to leave his theory untested for the time being.

There was also Russell Shipp, who was sure he could move small objects with his mind. We agreed to investigate his claim, and invited him to drop by to demonstrate his proposal. This is one part of our procedure we emphasize. Before we get involved in a formal test we always ask claimants to show us their stuff. This, we are sure, will save everybody a lot of hassle in the long run if there turns out to be nothing to show.

Anyhow, Mr. Shipp showed up and tried mightily. But to no avail. We saw nothing happening as he attempted to control a compact disk suspended by sewing thread. Even Mr. Shipp agreed at the time that things were not working.

That was last year. More recently we received the following e-mail (it always seems to start with an e-mail out of the blue):

EVENTS CALENDAR

March Program

The Legend of John Wilkes Boothe

Saturday, March 13 at 2 p.m.
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas
(Center for Non-Profit Management)

The North Texas Skeptics will present a talk by author Rusty Harding. Mr. Harding will discuss his book *Instrument of Darkness*. The book centers on the legend that John Wilkes Boothe escaped federal troops following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and lived out his life in Granbury, Texas. Members of The North Texas Skeptics are apt to take a skeptical view of this tale. Mr. Harding will be available to sign copies of his book following his talk.

This meeting is free and open to the public.

Phone 214-335-9248 for information.

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 members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend
 NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or
 reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings
 on topics of current interest or social events.

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To: <skeptic@ntskeptics.org>

I have an interesting test for your group.
 Please call or e-mail for details.

Sincerely,

Greg Nichols

We were naturally interested, and we invited Mr. Nichols to drop by.
 He came to our February meeting, even though we were snowed out of
 our meeting place, and we all had to huddle together inside a fast food
 place on Live Oak Street.

What Mr. Nichols had to show us was a substance that, when applied
 to the *outside* of a beverage container, would improve the taste of the
 beverage inside.

Even we skeptics had to agree that this was, indeed, a paranormal
 claim. We eagerly looked forward to the opportunity to see this miracle
 performed under controlled conditions.

Oops! That was the sticker. We wanted, as we always do, to com-
 pletely control the test in a manner that would eliminate testing bias or
 even, gasp, trickery.

For example, I have the opinion that if somebody sees a magical sub-
 stance applied to the outside of his drink container, that person might,
 just might, perceive a difference in taste. I would naturally insist that the
 test involve tasters who were required to sip identical drinks from identi-
 cal containers without knowing which container had been so treated.

We are sorry to report that our insistence on these minor details even-
 tually led to a complete breakdown in the negotiations between us and
 Mr. Nichols (and his partner, Mr. Willis). To make a long story short,
 Nichols and Willis told us in no uncertain terms what we could do with
 our challenge. More specifically, we received a final e-mail:

Dear John,

I guess I have to talk to you like you're a
 moron. Either you and your buddies can't
 read, won't read, are stupid, ignorant, or
 all of the above.

When you get the information we want to us,
 we can talk. When you are ready to comply
 with our demands, requests and concerns
 about the fairness of your so-called "Chal-
 lenge", we can talk.

I won't print the rest of their dispatch here, because they became
 rather rude a few sentences later. However, you can read all the e-mail
 exchange on the NTS Web site. Here is the URL:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/nichols/nichols.htm>

A note: To the displeasure of some of the claimants, we state up front that both parties to the NTS Challenge can use correspondence, recordings, etc., as they see fit. That means we can publish the e-mails, written correspondence, test results, and photos, and so can they. And we do.

The only time I will make an exception about publication is when we believe a claimant is mentally unstable or otherwise not legally responsible for his actions. This includes minors, as well. On at least one occasion, for example, I got well into an e-mail dialog with a claimant before I began to doubt the maturity of my correspondent. I did a quick check to confirm I was working with an adult.

Anyhow, here we stand. The \$10,000 is still in the bank, and I continue to watch my e-mail inbox. Somewhere out there may be that miracle worker who can really walk through walls (as one person claimed) or who can predict world events from his dreams (as another proposed).

Some, of course, have fretted that we are being unfair. We make the prize impossible to win. To this I have to say, it's not we who make it impossible. It's the laws of nature. We believe the problem lies with people who believe the laws of nature can be violated, and they can do it.

For some, addressing the issue through our challenge is like a dash of cold water. "Wow! Is that what reality is like?"

For others we will always be considered charlatans and cheats. To those people I can only mention that we state the conditions up front. Put up your own money and set your own conditions.



Talking about John Edward

Since the NTS is a public service organization, we like to do a little public service when we can.

William McEwen contacted us about giving a talk for the seniors outreach group at Methodist Charlton Medical Center on Wheatland Road. The matter of John Edward and his *Crossing Over* show seemed like a good topic, and we agreed on that. So it came to pass that a bright Thursday morning found me in the Medical Center auditorium facing an audience not that much older than I am.

First I had to report the bad news. My most recent e-mail on the topic indicates the SciFi Channel has canceled Edward's program. However, I doubt this situation will last. If you have ever watched John Edward recover from a series of sorry audience responses you will share this doubt, as well.

Of course, skill at cold reading is a mainstay for performers like John Edward, but, as skeptical writer Joe Nickell has pointed out, *hot reading* makes a bigger hit. An article in *Time* magazine noted that prior to a show, the *Crossing Over* program staff were busy mining the studio audience for personal information. Little wonder that Mr. Edward subsequently exhibited an amazing grasp of that information.

My talk also dug into the history of spiritualism, from its origins in America in 1849 with the Fox sisters to later actors in the drama, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Harry Houdini. I also touched on James Van Praagh and Sylvia Browne, two others currently making the TV circuit in the same style as John Edward.

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of

such inquiries to the scientific community, the media, and the public. It also promotes science and scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues.

The Skeptical Inquirer is published bimonthly by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Subscriptions should be addressed to

SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, Box 703, Amherst, NY 14226-0703. Or call toll-free 1-800-634-1610. Subscription prices: one year (six issues), \$35; two years, \$58; three years, \$81. You may also visit the CSICOP Web site at <http://www.csicop.org> for more information.

We had an open discussion following the talk-on the issue of TV psychics and on general skeptical matters, as well. The audience was a healthy mix of attitudes-from the generally skeptical to more credulous. I even met a Carl Baugh fan. All in a day for the life of a skeptic.

People needing a real skeptic for a serious talk or just to liven up a party can contact the NTS. We can't promise the same polish as John Edward, but our price is right.

John Blanton



Web news

We post news items of interest to skeptics on our Skeptical News page. We don't do a lot of skeptical filtering on the Skeptical News. We just let skeptics figure out the lay of the land for themselves. Here are a few recent postings of interest:

Evolution education update: Oklahoma

On February 24, House Bill 2194 was passed by the Oklahoma House of Representatives by a vote of 96-0. As originally introduced on February 2, HB 2194 required textbook publishers to furnish the State Textbook Committee with electronic files for the production of Braille versions of textbooks in conformance with U.S. Department of Education standards. On February 23, the bill was amended to include a new section that requires all textbooks that discuss evolution to include a long disclaimer, virtually identical to one previously proposed in Oklahoma in 2001 and 2003 and in use in Alabama from 1996 to 2001.

The proposed disclaimer describes evolution as "a controversial theory which some scientists present as scientific explanation for the origin of living things" and "the unproven belief that random, undirected forces produced a world of living things." It also states that "No one was present when life first appeared on earth. Therefore, any statement about life's origins should be reconsidered as theory, not fact."

Bill Graves (R-Oklahoma City), who proposed the disclaimer amendment to HB 2194, was quoted by reporter Sean Murphy in the *Claremore Daily Progress* as objecting to textbooks that portray evolution as a scientific fact. "I think it's very important for children to know ... If they just believe that they came from some slime in a swamp that's a whole lot different from being created in the image of God."

HB 2194 is now being considered by the Oklahoma Senate Committee on Education.

See the longer story on NCSE's web site:

http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2004/OK/329_evolution_disclaimer_bill_pass_2_26_2004.asp

Contributed by Glenn Branch, Deputy Director National Center for Science Education, Inc.

branch@ncseweb.org

<http://www.ncseweb.org>

Spare the rod? Not if you're a dowser looking for water

<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/localnews/stories/022304dnmetdowsing.61d6b.html>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-24.htm#dowsers>

Katie Menzer of *The Dallas Morning News* reported on a weekend conference of the Society of Dowsers' North Central Tejas chapter.

"It's very interesting how people choose to use it," said Sue Leibold, a longtime dowser and an organizer of the biennial conference that's been held in Dallas since the 1980s. It included lectures and workshops on spiritual dowsing, dowsing and landscaping, dowsing for gold, self-empowerment through dowsing and using dowsing for water purification.

Menzer reported that 40 dowsers showed up for a daylong class. Tools included "the L-rod, Y-rod, pendulum and others." Dowsers came from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Australia.

Newcomers could discover the various pitfalls waiting for an unwary dowser. "'Thought forms' – bundles of energy that can exist anywhere – often lead a dowser astray. Wind is also a factor."

One participant, a Mr. Blais had faced the problem of buying a music CD for a friend. "I didn't know which album to get, so I used my pendulum," he said. Mr. Blais said. He was able to get exactly the CD his friend wanted.

One of the organizers was our old friend Bette Epstein. "'Dowsing is like a sixth sense,' Ms. Epstein said Sunday. 'Anybody can do it.'" Readers will recall we first encountered Epstein back in 1992 when she boasted to us she could dowse maps to fine lost or otherwise missing items. For a while we

thought we had our first claimant for the North Texas Skeptics Paranormal Challenge. Too bad for us, Epstein considered our monetary offer insulting. Check out the mail exchange at the following URLs:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/1992/1992april/april1992.htm#letters>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/1992/1992march/march1992.htm#letter1>

Thousands flock to Benny Hinn meetings in Mumbai

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-24.htm#hinn>

<http://www.newkerala.com/news-daily/news/features.php?action=fullnews&showcomments=1&id=6258>

Shiv Kumar, Mumbai, reports in the 14 February on-line *India News*. The Catholic church did not approve, but thousands of Christians thronged to one of faith healer Benny Hinn's shindigs.

"We have made arrangements for 500,000 people though the numbers could be much higher," says organizer Gul Kripalani. Others say a million people are expected to attend the meet at the Bandra-Kurla complex in suburban Mumbai on Sunday.

Organizers chartered over 200 buses to transport people in for the fleecing. Even Cardinal Ivan Dias was unable to warn away the faithful Catholics. Many came to be healed.

Like other preachers, Hinn will "heal the sick". A special enclosure has been erected for the sick and needy near the stage where Hinn will hold forth.

People suffering from ailments such as arthritis, asthma, back pain and neck pain will be "cured".

Though rationalist groups have questioned the efficacy of such "healers", those with ailments continue to attend such meets in large numbers.

Thirty-two large video screens were set up so everybody could see and hear the amazing Mr. Hinn.

Big bang busted in science class for high schools

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-17.htm#bang>

<http://www.ajc.com/news/content/metro/0204/14msscience.html>

A story by Laura Diamond in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* follows up on the attempt to delete "evolution" from Georgia's science curriculum.

Some feared that the big-bang theory – the dominant scientific theory about the origins of the universe – would be absent.

Their fears were well founded.

Not only was the big bang gone, but plate tectonics had taken a washing. It would seem that creationists feel plate tectonics provides too much proof for an old Earth and evolution.

Concepts like the big bang, evolution and plate tectonics can be controversial in some circles because they offer scientific explanations of how the world began that don't correspond with some religious beliefs about how God created the universe, Earth and humans.

Associate professor of biology Sarah Pallas at Georgia State University noted there was an attempt to remove anything that might discomfort the creationists.

Guide sparks debate

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-17.htm#debate>

<http://www.mansfieldnewsjournal.com/news/stories/20040215/localnews/419984.html>

"Intelligent design" theory will be heard in classroom, reports Leo Shane of the *Mansfield News Journal* in Ohio.

After getting overwhelming support from the state Board of Education, evolution criticisms backed by religious groups will stay in the state's model curriculum for high school science classes.

By a 13-4 vote Tuesday, the board gave preliminary approval to the science model teaching guide. It includes a chapter titled "Critical analysis of evolution" that recommends 10th-graders debate several common critiques of the theory.

Supporters deny any connection with "intelligent design," but opponents say the arguments smack of intelligent design teachings.

Biology teacher Bryan McClelland doesn't like school boards calling the shots on selected pieces of the curriculum. "In a science classroom, we really need to be sure what we're teaching is science," he said.

Researching alternative medicines

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-06.htm#alternative>

<http://www.wsocv.com/news/2823177/detail.html>

It's big business. "Millions of people are spending billions of dollars every year on complementary and alternative medicine."

But right now, many alternative therapies that claim to work have never been tested or proved. Dr. Stephen E. Straus, director of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health, wants to put these practices through the best testing available so the public can then reap the benefits of those products and procedures that pass the tests.

Straus has published a report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* stressing “the importance of studying complementary and alternative treatments and how to make sure that the research is ethical.”

Conspiracies so vast

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/02/01/conspiracies_so_vast/

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2004-02-03.htm#vast>

Darrin M. McMahon writes “Conspiracy theory was born in the Age of Enlightenment and has metastasized in the Age of the Internet. Why won’t it go away?”

Howard Dean speculates on National Public Radio that George W. Bush may have been warned of 9/11 “ahead of time by the Saudis.” University professors imply with an air of sophistication that the war in Iraq was a plot to fill contracts for Halliburton. Radio shock-jocks rant against the machinations of the United Nations and the “New World Order.” And the conservative pundit Ann Coulter makes the rounds of the talk shows with a book, *Treason*, built on the claim that the vilification of Joseph McCarthy was the “greatest Orwellian fraud of our time.” The man who warned famously of a “great conspiracy” of communists, it seems, was himself the victim of a plot by “liberals” to blacken his good name.

Hillary Clinton may have given up her talk about the “vast right-wing conspiracy.” But there are plenty of others on both sides of the political divide anxious to continue the conversation. In today’s popular culture and even the elite media, plots lurk behind every door.

The deaths of Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed will not die as conspiracy theorists continue to fuel “ongoing speculation that the couple was murdered in a secret plot.” Even the NTS has a section of its Web site devoted to selling conspiracy theory books (through Amazon.com).

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/conspiracy.htm>



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.]

Political science: scientific integrity in the administration.

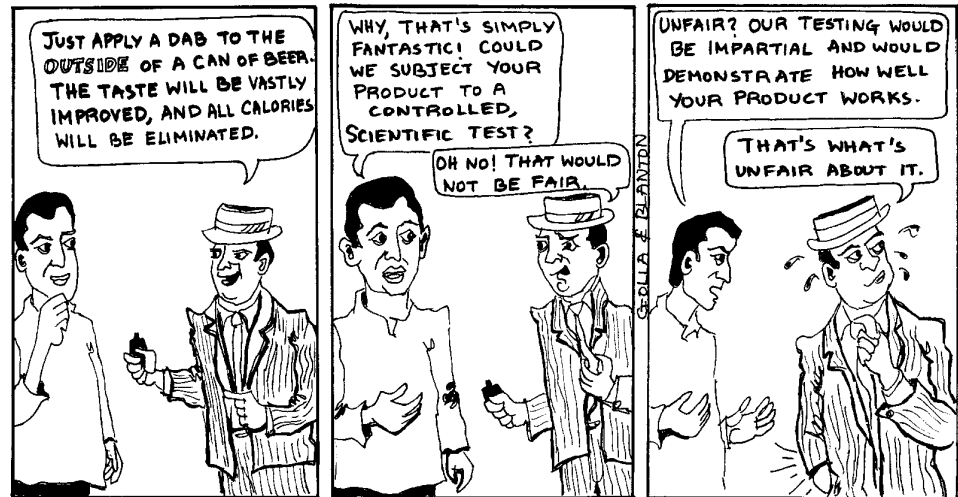
A statement issued Wednesday by a group of prominent scientists charged the administration with manipulating the science advisory process to support its political objectives: advisory panels are stacked; those that can’t be stacked are disbanded; reports that don’t reach the right conclusion are suppressed; and questionable policies are shielded from scientific review. Specific examples are in a report from the Union of Concerned Scientists, released at the same time, “Scientific Integrity in Policymaking: An Investigation into the Bush Administration’s Misuse of Science.” The statement was signed by more than 60 prominent scientists, including 20 Nobel laureates. The administration response was to trivialize the issue. “I think there are incidents where people have got their feathers ruffled,” sniffed John Marburger, science advisor to the President, quoted by the *New York Times*.

Primary scoop: “all the news that’s fit to print” – and more.

Like other Americans, we at What’s New follow the Presidential Primaries closely. But where could we turn to get beyond campaign rhetoric to the very character of the candidates? *The New York Times*, of course, the venerable “gray lady” of newspapers. We hear they’ve had some problems at the *Times* lately, but they sure scooped the competition with this one. It was on the op-ed page, which is not easy to get on. “The Stars Have Voted” by Erin Sullivan, relies on astrological charts of Democratic candidates. Did you know you can learn all about people if you just know their birthdays? It turns out the paper, then called the *Daily Times*, began on 18 Sep 1851. That makes the *New York Times* a Virgo, the only zodiacal sign represented by a woman. She is somewhat older and intelligent, but she can be rather pedantic and spinsterish. Yeah, that’s the *New York Times* all right. But what if it’s not true that a person’s character is determined by their birth date? Wouldn’t that mean the story was made up?

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2004.
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Creationism: “monkeys-to-man sort of thing” is under attack.

Guidelines proposed for science classes in Georgia omitted the word “evolution.” After the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published an article about the proposed changes, the state’s superintendent of schools, Kathy Cox explained that evolution is “a buzz word that causes a lot of negative reaction.” It was replaced with “changes over time.” But by Thursday, following a flood of criticism, she was recommending “evolution” be restored. Former President Jimmy Carter had said that he was embarrassed for the state. Governor Sonny Perdue said restoring the word “evolution” was “the right thing to do.” Meanwhile in Ohio, creationists are again seeking to force their religious views into public school classrooms, this time through the back door. Lesson plans up for approval at an Ohio Board of Education meeting on Monday and Tuesday include intelligent design, as well as young-Earth creationism. The cases in Georgia and Ohio once again make it clear that for science education to remain free of religious dictates, we must stay informed and organized.

Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

We’re number 1

OK. It’s not the Pulitzer committee, but the *Dallas Observer* has designated this rag the best newsletter in Dallas for 2003. I am sure *The Dallas Morning News* is smarting over the upset.

I quote from the *Observer*’s on-line notice at

<http://www.dallasobserver.com/issues/2003-09-25/bestculture21.html/1/index.html>:

Don’t get us wrong. We like UFO stuff and The Lost City of Atlantis and health supplements and crop circles and magnetic shoe arches and secret government experiments. This is the stuff of life, the fruit of the twisted imagination. We just have a difficult time taking it in its raw, unadulterated form. When filtered through the monthly debunking machine of this sharply edited newsletter, though, it’s perfect. We get our Face on Mars cake and a list of the bizarre ingredients, too. It’s like reading Hollywood gossip crunched and analyzed by *The New York Times*. Brought to you by the fine minds of the North Texas Skeptics club, the newsletter features short items and long essays written by an array of local physicians, scientists and academics. Of course, you have to join to get it or, like us, pretend you are a member of the Fourth Estate. For details, visit their Web site at www.ntskeptics.org.

Really, you don’t have to join to get it. Many get The North Texas Skeptic for free (it’s whom you know), including some at the *Observer* and the *News*. And, you can always read it on-line for free at

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/past.htm>.

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Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible and scientific point of view, and while I do not endorse the a priori rejection of paranormal phenomena and pseudoscientific claims, I believe that such claims must be subjected to the fair and systematic testing which rational enquiry demands.

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