



# *The North Texas*

# Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

## Lacking luster

by John Blanton

I previously commented on French writer Thierry Meyssan's book *L'Effroyable Imposture* (The Frightening Fraud). In his book Meyssan tries to convince us that large parts of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were faked and maybe even have been perpetrated by the U.S. Government. In particular, he hints the attack on the Pentagon did not involve an airliner. He names a missile strike as a possible alternative.

At the time I had a few harsh comments on M. Meyssan's thinking, and I admit to being entirely dismissive of his position. I may have even mentioned the words "liar" and "fool." Now I'm beginning to think I was too hasty.

This is because new evidence has come out in recent days. In particular, actor Charlie Sheen has made headlines by raising his voice in doubt of the official version. In the icy, skeptical climate of the early twenty-first century, there has been a strong and vocal backlash against Sheen's temerity at bucking the orthodoxy. Some critics have even stooped so low as to question his personal qualities.

With that in mind, I aim to go out of my way to be kind and to give Mr. Sheen some slack. So, here goes:

Esteemed scientist and structural expert, Charles Sheen, who sometimes works as an actor, has weighed in on the controversy surrounding the dubious claims by the fascist U.S. Government that this country was attacked on 11 September 2001 by a band of amateur terrorists. In particular, he has proved conclusively that it is virtually impossible that a group of misfits could hijack airliners employing nothing more than utility knives and pepper spray, and further, that these misguided individuals could bring down two of the world's tallest buildings and smash a good part of the Pentagon building using these airliners.

His arguments are conclusive and damning. For example, talking about the World Trade Center attack, he has said in an interview posted on Mathaba News Network: <sup>1</sup>

"There was a feeling, it just didn't look any commercial jetliner I've flown on any time in my life and then when the buildings came down later on that day I

## EVENTS CALENDAR

### Saturday 8 April 2006

2 p.m.  
Center for Nonprofit  
Management  
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

**Really Alternative Energy:**  
bubble fusion, meta-isotopes  
and other unlikely cures for the  
energy crisis

For the April meeting, John  
Brandt will present a talk on real  
and imagined alternative energy  
sources.

### Board of Directors/Social Meeting

Saturday — 22 April  
7 p.m. at:  
Good Eats  
6950 Greenville Ave.  
Dallas

We sometimes cancel or change  
these events. Check the **NTS  
Hotline** at  
214-335-9248.

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said to my brother ‘call me insane, but did it sorta look like those  
 buildings came down in a controlled demolition’?”

Some people call me skeptical, but I can’t get around truth like that.  
 Believe me, skeptics, an Academy Award caliber actor wouldn’t make a  
 statement like that unless it were true and he had incontrovertible evi-  
 dence to back it up stashed away in the safe of a Watergate lawyer where  
 the FBI and the CIA can’t get at it.

Defenders of the 9/11 orthodoxy, lacking any legitimate counter to  
 Sheen’s meticulous analysis, have chosen, instead, to attack him person-  
 ally. However, these scurrilous attacks are going nowhere, due mainly  
 to Sheen’s sterling personal life. Besides holding advanced degrees in  
 international affairs and structural analysis, Mr. Sheen is known for his  
 personal commitment to human welfare. His friends note his participa-  
 tion in several research studies involving experiments with street  
 pharmaceuticals and the aid he has given to the less fortunate among us,  
 particularly prostitutes.

OK, I said I would be kind, but I didn’t say anything about being  
 truthful.

The Kennedy assassination conspiracy industry has reached mid-  
 dle-age, and a replacement is about due. Let’s check out what the 9/11  
 conspiracies have going for them:

- Events of national and world-wide impact
- Witnessed by thousands of people (millions?)
- Major participants are dead

The story grabs our attention and holds on long enough to allow  
 doubt to germinate. Deniability goes with the deaths of first hand wit-  
 nesses, so planted tales have the opportunity to take root and grow.  
 Finally, a major revisionist industry flowers and thrives as a thirst for  
 sensationalism continues to fertilize the enterprise.

Today’s political climate weighs heavily, as well. Early on, the Bush  
 administration co-opted the 9/11 tragedy and employed it for consider-  
 able gain. As a result, the administration’s detractors are the major bene-  
 ficiaries of the new trade in conspiracy theories. Bush opponents seem  
 to be, for the moment, the major voice of doubt. If the current wave fol-  
 lows past form, this will change with time. Like the Kennedy assassina-  
 tion, 9/11 will one day have its own Conspiracy Museum. And in the  
 coming 40 years the 9/11 conspiracy theories will show a similar amount  
 of progress.

### References

- 1 [http://mathaba.net/0\\_index.shtml?x=531488](http://mathaba.net/0_index.shtml?x=531488)

## Web News

by John Blanton

*The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.*

Collection of odds

We don't make these up. If we did we would be looking for a book publisher right now.

### Fairies stop developers' bulldozers in their tracks

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-03-31.htm#fairies>

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-1881612,00.html>

**OK, this is not what you think**

**By Will Pavia and Chris Windle**

VILLAGERS who protested that a new housing estate would "harm the fairies" living in their midst have forced a property company to scrap its building plans and start again.

If you are one of those people who think fairies don't exist, you need to talk to Marcus Salter. He figures he has lost £15,000 over some of these non-existent fairies. Neighbors of his Perthshire development in Scotland started to protest when his excavators started to disturb the fairies' home, located under a rock.

Townfolk turned out to much more concerned with the welfare of the wee folk than with Mr. Salter's plans for development. Unable to dismiss all this concern as a joke, he has had to redesign the human phase of the housing complex to accommodate denizens of the netherworld. As he tells his story:

"I went to a meeting of the community council and the concerns cropped up there," he said. The council was considering lodging a complaint with the planning authority, likely to be the kiss of death for a housing development in a national park. Jeannie Fox, council chairman, said: "I do believe in fairies but I can't be sure that they live under that rock. I had been told that the rock had historic importance, that kings were crowned upon it." Her main objection to moving the rock was based on the fact that it had stood on the hillside for so long: a sort of MacFeng Shui that many in the village subscribe to.

"There are a lot of superstitions going about up here and people do believe that things like standing stones and large rocks should never be moved," she said.

Although there are not strict guidelines on fairies, Mr. Salter had to restart his design from ground zero.

The new estate will now centre on a small park, in the middle of which stands a curious rock. Work begins next month, if the fairies allow.

### Dutchman builds modern Noah's Ark

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-03-31.htm#ark>

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4853890.stm>

Forget that the fabled ark is just that, a fable. Johan Huibers thinks there needs to be another one.

Dutchman Johan Huibers is building a working replica of Noah's Ark as a testament to his Christian faith.

The 47-year-old from Schagen, 45km (30 miles) north of Amsterdam, plans to set sail in September through the interior waters of the Netherlands.

In the original story in the book of Genesis, Noah did all the work himself, perhaps with the help of his sons. Perhaps with help from above. Huibers lives in the real world and has to put up with some basic principles of economics and engineering. His ark is going to be a one-fifth scale model. Besides, he won't be rounding up two of every species (would you want to take on the task of collecting two of every species of beetle). Instead he's just going to load up with farm animals. Also he will use American cedar and Norwegian pine instead of the prescribed "gopher wood."

He "hopes the project will renew interest in Christianity in the Netherlands." To say nothing of renewing interest in maritime insurance underwriting.

Mr. Huibers plans to spend about \$1.2 million on the project and plans on getting bank loans to finance the work. In this respect he has it all over Noah. Imagine if Noah had tried to get a bank loan. Banker: "And when do you plan to repay this loan, Noah?" Noah: "How long can you tread water?"

Mr. Huibers will charge for tours, which will include a drink and a religious pamphlet. He needs 100,000 paying visitors to break even. We will do what we can to help out.

Hey look. It's starting to rain.

### 'Spaghetti Monster' is noodling around with faith

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-03-31.htm#pasta>

[http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2006-03-26-spaghetti-monster\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/2006-03-26-spaghetti-monster_x.htm)

By Dan Vergano, USA TODAY

Is the world ready for The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster?

Will its revelations — that pirates control global warming, that there's a beer volcano in heaven, and that superstition trumps science every time — overwhelm religious belief for all mankind?

Probably not.

Worship of the Flying Spaghetti Monster — “Pastafarianism” as it is known to its adherents — began as a whimsical side dish in last year's standoff between advocates of evolution and intelligent design. FSM, as it is known to its followers, took shape in a protest letter to Kansas officials who were embroiled in a controversy about how to teach students about the origins of life. The parody religion leapt from those pages to become an Internet phenomenon, finding fans among supporters of the theory of evolution — and receiving e-mailed threats of bodily harm from evolution's opponents.

FSM creator, Bobby Henderson, wrote the original letter for his own amusement. He also may have been under the mistaken impression that the Intelligent Design movement represented a competition for fabricating the most absurd explanation of human origins. The judges are still out on this, but my money is with ID and the those jokers at Discovery Institute.

Henderson is still only 25 years old, so he still has some time to make up for the DI's head start. His paperback, *The Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, came out in March. It's from Villard for \$13.95, but you can get a discount from Amazon. Order it through the NTS Web site. Here's the link:

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

Here are some excerpts:

- A “Flying Spaghetti Monster” created the universe, Earth and its creatures, making a few mistakes on the way after drinking heavily from heaven's beer volcano.
- The FSM hid dinosaur fossils underground to “dupe mankind” about Earth's true age and is the secret force behind gravity, pushing everything downward with its “noodly appendage.”

- The FSM wants everyone to talk and dress like pirates. Global warming is considered a punishment for the relative scarcity of pirates these days.
- Every Friday is a sloth-filled holy day. Instead of “amen,” devotees end missives with “R'amen,” in honor of the college student's favorite noodle fare.

Henderson moved from Oregon to Arizona, partly to escape the uproar his parody has generated among those of us with limited imaginations.

“The Flying Spaghetti Monster is a kind of particularly amusing shell fired off in the ongoing culture wars,” says Arizona State University's Lance Gharavi, an editor of *The Journal of Religion and Theater*. “Ultimately, it is an argument about the arbitrariness of holding any one view of creation.”

Here's more from *USA Today* on the history of the FSM:

The FSM was born in a satirical letter Henderson sent last year to the Kansas Board of Education, which voted to teach alternatives to evolution in high school science classes. The vote was heralded as a victory for proponents of “intelligent design,” who see the hand of an intelligent force rather than natural selection in the evolution of mankind. Intelligent-design advocates such as Lehigh University biochemist Michael Behe believe some biological structures, such as the wagging flagellum tail of some microbes, are too complex to have simply evolved.

Henderson applauded the board's openness to amending its science standards and called for the addition of pastafarianism to its curriculum. Henderson nominated a sentient spaghetti bowl as his intelligent designer and demanded equal time for his teaching.

This was set against the backdrop of a court battle and eventual ruling by U.S. District Judge John E. Jones that intelligent design is warmed-over creationism and cannot be taught in a Pennsylvania school district, a victory for evolution advocates.

Wait, that's not all: BoingBoing.com has since offered \$250,000 for empirical evidence that “Jesus is not the son of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.”

So, where will all of this lead? That depends on the Discovery Institute. If the likes of Michael Behe and William Dembski decide to up the ante in this contest for the absurd there may be yet another round of silliness to follow. My advice: Hold off for a while there, guys. Give Bobby Henderson a chance to catch up.



## What's new

By Robert Park

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

### Miracle medicine: prayers of scientists have been answered.

The long-awaited study of intercessory prayer for coronary bypass patients was released yesterday (see last week's WN). A small increase in complications, attributed to "performance anxiety," was found in a subset of patients who were told that strangers were praying for them. Otherwise, there was nothing. Scientists are relieved of course; science is tough enough without having to worry that somebody on their knees in East Cupcake, Iowa can override natural law. The study of 1800 patients took almost ten years and cost \$2.4M, mostly from the Templeton Foundation. Of course, there are calls for further study. Where do we start? What are the units of prayer? Do prayers of Pat Robertson count more than those of death-row inmates? What is the optimum posture of the supplicant? Where can we learn these things?

### Cold-fusion day: does Fleischmann still brew tea on hot plate?

On 23 March 2006, D2Fusion, Inc., a subsidiary of Solar Energy, Ltd., issued a press release to announce that cold-fusion pioneer Martin Fleischmann had agreed to serve as "senior scientific advisor" to produce a cold-fusion heater. Seventeen years ago, on 23 March 1989, the University of Utah held a press conference to announce the discovery of "cold fusion" by Martin Fleischmann and Stanley Pons. D2Fusion believes "he still holds the secret."

### Miracle medicine: *Wash Post* hypes prayer study on page one.

Today, in a major front-page story, staff writer Rob Stein tells us that "the largest, best-designed study of intercessory prayer" is being published in two weeks. What does it say? The secret is guarded as tightly as the Academy Awards. However, as I write this, the world population clock reads 6,505,424,096. Most of them pray. A bunch of them pray 5 times a day. They pray mostly for their health, or that of loved ones, making prayer by far the most widely practiced medical therapy. It's a wonder anyone is still sick. No one doubts that personal "petitionary" prayer benefits believers. Optimism is good medi-

cine. To the believer, prayer is a stronger placebo than sugar pills. Stein, however, has his facts wrong. The controversy (if there ever was one among scientists) was settled in 1872 by Sir Francis Galton when he published "Statistical Inquiries into the Efficacy of Prayer." Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, recognized that remote prayer by strangers would be blind to the placebo effect.

Since the Order for Morning Prayer of the Church of England includes prayers for the health and long life of the monarch and the archbishop, he compared their longevity to that of the general population and found no difference. So who is doing this new study? Herbert Benson, founder and president of the Mind-Body Institute, who touted the health benefits of prayer in his 1975 bestseller "The Relaxation Effect." It would be a miracle if he now discovers there's nothing to it. It's in our hands now, we have two weeks to pray that the study turns out to be objective.

### Mouse medicine: controversial cure for diabetes is verified.

Today's *Science* magazine carries reports by three separate groups verifying a controversial cure for Type I diabetes in mice. First reported by Denise Faustman in 2001, the treatment induces the pancreas to repair itself in half to two-thirds of the cases, which many researchers thought was impossible. The findings are encouraging, but there is a long history of cures for disease in mice that do not work out in humans. However, a waiting list of 600 is clamoring for human trials. The alternative is prayer.

### The H-prize: would incentives hasten transition to hydrogen?

Rep. Bob Inglis (R-SC), Research Subcommittee Chair, announced that next week he will introduce legislation to create a major new incentive of perhaps \$100 million to overcome scientific and technical barriers to a hydrogen economy. Like maybe the First Law of Thermodynamics? Inglis was inspired by the "success" of the Ansari X-Prize, which awarded \$10 million for bringing a few minutes of space sickness into the lives of the rich and bored.

### Just a theory: Anglican leader speaks out about creationism.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, told *The Guardian* on Tuesday that creationism devalues the Bible as "just another theory." His choice of words was ironic in view of the anti-evolution slogan.

## The bigger prize: is “the anthropic principle” infectious?

Sir John Templeton had stipulated in 1972 that his prize for “Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities,” now at \$1.4 million, was to always be bigger than the Nobel. British cosmologist John Barrow has been awarded the Templeton Prize for 2006. Barrow is best known for “The Anthropic Cosmological Principle,” written with Frank Tipler in 1986. The “anthropic principle” states that the laws of nature were fine-tuned by the Great Designer to allow the existence of beings so intelligent that they could discover the anthropic principle. This is so incredibly deep that something happens to scientists who dwell on it too long. In Tipler’s case, it led him in 1996 to write, “The Physics of Immortality,” in which he derives, “the existence of God and the resurrection of the dead” . In Barrow’s case it led to the 2006 Templeton Prize.

## Below the ground state: before spring there is march madness.

On March 23, 1989 in Salt Lake City, the University of Utah held a press conference to announce the discovery of cold fusion, but the story had already been leaked to the world’s most influential financial dailies, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*. Both papers continued to print unfailingly optimistic reports for weeks. Among those lured into the swamp was Randell Mills, a 1986 graduate of Harvard Medical School. Two years later Mills held a press conference of his own to announce that it wasn’t fusion. It was better! Hydrogen atoms can shrink into “hydrinos,” releasing energy. With the 17th anniversary of cold fusion approaching, both papers are now running credulous stories about Mills and his company, BlackLight Power. BLP, which has never produced anything, is rumored to be preparing an IPO.

## Perpetual fraud: notorious huckster is up to his old tricks.

Dennis Lee doesn’t sell perpetual motion machines. He sells dealerships for perpetual motion machines. He’s done hard time, but he wears it as a badge of honor, proof that the establishment is trying to suppress his inventions. He has never delivered a free-energy machines to a dealer, but he still sells dealerships. Can he be stopped? In 2002 the state of Washington, with the help of an obscure professor of physics, barred Lee’s company, Better World Technologies, from doing business. Six months later, with the help of the same physics professor, it was Maine. It was slow, but at that rate he’d be out of business by my 100th birthday. It was not to be. Last week, Eric Krieg, a long-time nemesis of Lee and the head of an active group of skeptics in Philadelphia, pointed out that Lee is on tour again. One stop on the tour is Seattle. Seattle, WA? How could

this be? It’s not Better World Technologies that doing the tour, it’s Better World Alternatives, a separate marketing company set up by Lee. In the age of the internet, education is the only weapon against scams.

## Bubble fusion: news of science that won’t change your life.

The story sounded vaguely familiar. A claim was made in the month of March that deuterium fusion had been produced in a desktop experiment. However, experienced nuclear physicists, using the same experimental setup except for better detection equipment, found no evidence of fusion. By early summer, the bubble burst. “Cold fusion” in 1989? No, “bubble fusion” in 2002, . But like cold fusion, the corpse of bubble fusion keeps twitching. In 2003, Rusi Taleyarkhan, who made the claim, moved from Oak Ridge to Purdue University. There he claimed to confirm fusion. Others found nothing. Last week, citing “extremely serious” concerns, Purdue announced a full review of Taleyarkhan’s work.

## School spirit: 8 out of 10 academics say they are spiritual.

Maybe. Today’s *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports on a UCLA survey of 46,670 faculty members at 421 institutions. Sixty-four percent called themselves religious, but there was only a 38% response rate to the survey. I would have summarized the results differently: 38% of faculty members are willing to respond to a survey about their spiritual beliefs. Anything else is a guess.

## Faith-based government: federal money for religious charities?

President Bush this week signed an executive order establishing a religion-based office in Homeland Security. It will pray the levees hold in another hurricane. The Bush administration gave more than \$2.1B to church operated social programs last year.

## Glucosamine and chondroitin: ineffective for arthritis pain?

We got a lot of mail last week about our comment on these popular dietary supplements. Based on an NIH-funded trial, reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, WN characterized G-C as “ineffective” for osteoarthritis knee pain. The study reported that: “Overall, glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate were not significantly better than a placebo in reducing knee pain by 20 percent.” The double-blind trial was placebo controlled, and celecoxib (Celebrex) was used as a positive control. The problem is that the 1583 patients in the trial were divided

# Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2006. Free, non-commercial



into subsets based on severity of pain. Although it was ineffective overall, indignant WN readers pointed out that for the moderate-to-severe subset G-C “provided statistically significant pain relief compared to a placebo.” Statisticians groaned: by dividing the cohort into subgroups, the outcome for a specific subset can usually be altered by fiddling with the boundaries. The bottom line in the NEJM study, incidentally, is the ubiquitous report ending, “continued research is needed to establish efficacy.”

## We feel your pain: what’s new does a study of the bottom line.

Much of the e-mail about G-C was anecdotal. Not just from people who used it themselves, but also those who had treated dogs, cats and horses with it (vets love G-C, and point out that pets don’t respond to placebos). “The plural of anecdote,” someone said, “is data.” Although anecdotes are not blind; we decided to see what the data might tell us about What’s New. First we divided the messages into subgroups. The groups ranged from, “He’s just guessing,” to “Park is a liar and must be getting paid under the table by Pfizer.” We’re still fiddling with the boundaries.

## Dover effect: even in Utah, anti-Darwin legislation flops.

Utah is one of the most conservative states in the nation, but on Monday, legislation favoring intelligent design lost. Alas, I’m sure the Discovery Institute will be able to find a new gimmick.

## Acupuncture: it doesn’t matter where you stick the needle.

According to an article in *Lancet Neurology*, German researchers found that Chinese acupuncture worked about as well as drugs in treating arthritis, but so did sham acupuncture, in which the needle is inserted in the wrong place. WN has been saying this for years .

Bob Park can be reached via email at [opa@aps.org](mailto:opa@aps.org).

## 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.

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