



The North Texas

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Stupid, and deadly

by John Blanton

Consider, for a moment, that Darwin could have been right all along.

OK, forget Darwin. Consider for a moment that there is a species on this planet so incompetent it needs to go extinct right now.

That would be us.

Recent developments would bear this out. Let me elaborate.

I made a joke a few years back about dowsing for land mines. ¹ I should have been more circumspect. The truth of the matter turns out to be ludicrous beyond belief.

In a recent blog post, Bob Park alerted us to a scam that just will not go away. In the UK a company known as ATSC has for several years marketed their ADE 651, a device for detecting dangerous explosives, including bombs carried by enemy agents. The technology would be undeniably beneficial, if only it worked. In reality, the device is little more than a dressed up water dowser. Its evolution is akin to the genesis of Intelligent Design from young-Earth creationism.

We should have been warned, because ADE 651 has an antecedent dating back more than ten years. In his post from 12 January 1996 Bob Park highlighted the remarkable Quadro Tracker. ²

What's cuckoo: high-tech dowsing rod locates timid laboratory.

The Quadro Corporation, which markets the QRS 250G Detector, a dowsing rod with an antenna that outperforms old fashioned willow branches, says the device can locate anything from weapons to buried treasure—well worth the price of \$995 each. But a Sandia National Labs scientist thought it might be a good idea to test one. It failed to locate anything; dissection found just plastic! Sandia sources tell WN that management directed scientists to remain silent in the face of a threat of legal action by Quadro.

EVENTS CALENDAR

November program

Saturday, November 13
2 p.m.
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

The November program is yet to be determined. Check our Web Site at ntskeptics.org for information.

NTS board meeting and social dinner

Saturday, November 20,
at 7:00 p.m.

La Carreta Argentina
1115 North Beckley Avenue
Dallas, TX 75203

If you plan to attend, please call. We sometimes cancel or change these events.

214.335.9248

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An entry in Wikipedia notes that between 1993 and 1996 “[a]round 1,000 were sold to police departments and school districts around the United States on the basis that it could detect hidden drugs, explosives, weapons and lost golf balls.”³

Developments unfolded, and the FBI obtained a permanent injunction to keep the device from being marketed in the United States. Principles of Quadro Corp. of Harleyville, South Carolina, were brought to trial for fraud but were acquitted on all charges.

Move forward and across the pond.

In the UK ATSC Limited has the following product description on their Web site:⁴

ADE651® is the latest generation of long-range detector products offered by ATSC. As with other ADE™ substance detectors, it incorporates long-range electromagnetic attraction to enable the effective identification of even the most difficult substances including explosive and narcotic materials. Unlike other trace detectors, that are limited by the need to have actual physical contact with the item sampled, the ADE651® is able to detect programmed substances at long distances safely and without the need to have actual physical contact with the substance. As such, the ADE651® continues to set standards for the detection of substances.

As with Quadro, ATSC seems to have sailed right past the watchdogs of sanity. At least for a while. Then somebody woke up. *The Independent* reported on 23 January this year:⁵

Hundreds of people have been killed in horrific bombings in Iraq after a British company supplied “bogus” equipment which failed to detect explosive devices.

The head of the company, which has made tens of millions of pounds from the sale of the detectors, has now been arrested and the British Government has announced a ban on their export to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Accounts of the ADE 651 indicate it works through the user’s expectations. The ADE 651, like all such devices, requires physical contact with the operator. This allows subtle, usually subconscious, operator actions to affect the device and to influence any indications of detection. In what may be an oversimplification, the operator expects there is no bomb, the device confirms his expectation. Reality notwithstanding.

What is so bizarre about the whole Quadro-ADE 651 business is how easy it is to falsify their claims. Put some explosive in a vehicle, or not. Don’t tell the operator. Is the device correct significantly better than chance?

It would have taken about twenty minutes for a conscientious appraiser to reject these devices and to send their purveyors off to Vaudeville where they belong. Instead, numerous government agencies, representing budgets of billions of dollars annually, saw only the glitter

and the promise of an easy fix. And they pulled out the taxpayer's checkbook.

The legion of the duped is impressive. An item on Wikipedia reports the following purchasers/users of the ADE 651. Some of these reports derive from ATSC promotional materials and not from actual observation:⁶

- Iraqi Police Service and Iraqi Army: The Interior Ministry purchased 800 items in 2008 for \$32 million and 700 in 2009 for \$53 million. Top price was \$60,000 per unit.
- Mexican state of Colima: One was purchased for \$60,000.
- Lebanese Army
- Chinese Police
- Royal Thai Police
- Interior Ministry of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraqi Kurdistan
- Hotels in Jordan: Required by the government
- Saudi Arabia
- Indian police
- Police in the Belgian municipal region of Geel-Laakdal-Meerhout (Used to detect drugs)
- A Belgian drug squad
- A Hong Kong correctional facility
- Chittagong Navy (Bangladesh)
- Pakistan's Airport Security force: To detect bombs at the Jinnah International Airport in Karachi

It does not warm my heart to learn that superstitious nonsense is not the exclusive purview of the uneducated yokel from the outback. Sit down at a conference table to discuss project planning at a high-tech concern in this country or elsewhere, and it's possible the person sitting next to you is ready to buy into the Quadro Tracker, the ADE 651 or the next baseless gimmick to come our way. The fictional Jed Clampett would hold his own with these people.

People ask me, and other skeptics, why we take such a passion for the truth. What's the harm, they say, if people have their little myths, their little fantasies? Sometimes I shrug off these annoyances with some glib remark. Such as, "Because people can die."



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Web news

by John Blanton

A bit has transpired since we last dipped into Web news, so some catching up is in order. The creationist Center for Science and Culture (CSC) from the Discovery Institute has launched a new offensive and is shopping the latest creationist video around. They are backing it up with lectures by notable creationists on their staff. Politics has barged into science again, with high-profile conservative candidates stepping up to creationism, or, in at least one case, pedaling vigorously away from the topic. We will start with this last.

Christine O'Donnell is running for the U.S. Senate in Delaware, and she is being hounded by revelations of her past (and maybe current) view that "evolution is a myth." Comedian/commentator Bill Maher had O'Donnell on his show as a panelist some years back, and these days he is gleefully playing back some her more bizarre comments. *Washington Times* columnist Amanda Read tells part of the tale:¹

Last week, Bill Maher didn't unearth an archived youthful indiscretion to make Christine O'Donnell the laughingstock of her critics. Rather, he insulted not only O'Donnell, but an untold number of people who question the scientific status quo.

"Evolution is a myth, and Darwin himself..." O'Donnell began to explain before being interrupted by Maher in a clip from 1998.

Read's piece doesn't seem to give O'Donnell much lift, although that may have been the intent. The *Washington Times* is owned by the Unification Church, which in turn is headed up by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, of whom creationist Jonathan Wells is a disciple. Any connection beyond that is purely speculative.

Our Great State of Texas (if we can still call it that) suffered some damage through the words of the current (and likely future) governor, Rick Perry.²

“I am a firm believer in intelligent design as a matter of faith and intellect, and I believe it should be presented in schools alongside the theories of evolution. The State Board of Education has been charged with the task of adopting curriculum requirements for Texas public schools and recently adopted guidelines that call for the examination of all sides of a scientific theory, which will encourage critical thinking in our students, an essential learning skill.”

We got beat at the Alamo. We'll get over this, as well.

The creationists were back again at SMU in September. This time it was an event named *4 Nails in Darwin's Coffin*, and it features the same group, if not the same people, who were here in March 1992 for an event called *Darwinism: Scientific Inference or Philosophical Preference*.³

Phillip Johnson, now considered to be the godfather of the modern Intelligent Design movement in this country, was there, as were CSC founder Stephen C. Meyer and professor of biochemistry Michael Behe. Meyer is author of the most recent notable creationist book *Signature in the Cell*, and Behe is author of *Darwin's Black Box* and also *The Edge of Evolution*. All these books seek to either lend some boost to Intelligent Design or at the very least to take some of the shine off the science behind biological evolution. Of these luminaries just mentioned, only Meyer made the return trip in September.

The principal feature of the *4 Nails* event was a showing of the video *Darwin's Dilemma*, said video aspiring to promote Intelligent Design by challenging main stream scientists on the matter of the Cambrian fossils.

I don't have an egg timer, so I measure small intervals by how long it takes the CSC to crow about such an event afterwards and also to respond after any reasonable person comments critically. I am thinking that nobody is that quick on their feet. In this case they surely saw the tide coming in and prepared their defenses in advance.

Following the event, eight SMU professors, from disciplines ranging from history to biology to physics, published a protest in the school's *SMU Daily Campus.com*. The effort was headed up by biology professor John Wise, who apparently has long experience with this kind of creationist. Wise has a Web site that runs to great lengths on what is wrong with Intelligent Design.

Wise opens his complaint saying, “They presented a film and live presentations filled with distortions of the legitimate scientific literature to bolster what they believe is evidence for the existence of a Creator (the Intelligent Designer).” Then he gets down to details:⁴

Misquoted, misrepresented, falsely interpreted, grossly exaggerated and outright silliness tangen-

tially derived from the scientific literature concentrating on four real scientists (Darwin, Gould, Conway-Morris and Valentine) slickly mixed with deception, misinterpretations and long-windedness from five Discovery Institute employees (Meyer, Wells, Nelson, Axe and Sternberg).

Then he gets serious.

That was on 27 September. On 30 September event promoter Jerret Sykes was ready with a response:⁵

This past Monday, eight different SMU faculty members submitted an opinion article entitled “SMU professors speak out against Darwin presentation.” They argued that the presentation “4 Nails in Darwin's Coffin: New Challenges to Darwinian Evolution” put on by Discovery Institute (DI), was a “dishonest attempt to present a particular form of religion and science.” This allegation was then followed by a few dishonest, misunderstood and slightly biased claims of their own.

The first thing that Sykes finds to be false is the assertion that the Discovery Institute is well-funded. He compares the D.I.'s funding with that of SMU. What he fails to mention is that SMU has a student body of thousands and a faculty of hundreds of well-educated, professional scientists and other teachers who teach academically sound principals and who do real science.

Sykes also takes Wise and the others to task over his implication that the D.I. came to SMU in part to bask in the glow of legitimate academics. Sykes never denies this was a goal of the D.I., but he begs to shed this accusation. This plea is not convincing. If social climbing was not a goal of the SMU presentation, then the CSC wasted a lot of time and effort, because this is something they do routinely. A little history shows the D.I. seeking to put on an event at a legitimate center of science and academics and bragging when they succeed, whining when they fail and, finally, accusing the declining entity of everything from religious intolerance to censorship of free thought.

Sykes objects to the assertion that the presentations were pseudo-scientific and that the presenters were people of dubious academic integrity. He reminds us that all of these presenters hold legitimate Ph. D. degrees from prestigious colleges and universities. Sykes needs to read Martin Gardner's tidy little book *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* for a review of historic pseudo-scientists and other charlatans with top-tier academic credentials.

Lastly, Sykes chides the eight for failing to speak up at the presentation when they saw academic misconduct in the making. For the record, the professors did the right thing by holding

off and putting their words into print. To stand up and argue publicly with a clown only elevates the clown.

I sent Jerret Sykes an invitation by e-mail to follow up and elaborate on his objections. That was in September, but to date I have received no response from him.

The CSC also had a ready reply:⁶

Responding to John Wise's Table Pounding at Southern Methodist University

There's an old saying in the law that goes like this:
When the facts are on your side, pound the facts.
When the facts are not on your side, pound the table.
If the responses to Discovery Institute's recent conference at Southern Methodist University (SMU) are any indication, the facts are not on the side of anti-ID faculty at SMU.

This was penned by master debater Casey Luskin on the CSC staff, and a complete treatment will require some space. Look for more in a future issue. In the mean time, go to our *Skeptical News* pages and follow the chain of links to Luskin's piece and more.

So much for objections from those nerdy academic types at SMU. Mark Chancey is chair of the Department of Religious Studies at SMU. He had a few choice words concerning the 4 Nails presentation and regarding Intelligent Design in general. Along with a brief dissection of the Intelligent Design movement and its apparent motives, Chancey recapitulated an item that Jerret Sykes had found objectionable:⁷

Why the sensitivity over IDers' appearance at SMU?
Here, historical context is important.

Unfortunately, the Discovery Institute has a track record of using SMU's prestige and academic reputation to bolster its own claims to legitimacy. Consider this quote from Phillip E. Johnson, a chief ID architect: "The movement we now call the Wedge made its public debut at a conference of scientists and philosophers held at Southern Methodist University in March 1992."

Johnson goes on to characterize that conference as "a respectable academic gathering." This language implies that SMU sponsored an academic conference in which ID proponents participated as full-fledged scholars. In fact, the 1992 event, too, was sponsored not by any academic unit of the university but by a campus ministry—a detail conspicuously absent from Johnson's description.

Before an egg timer could go off the CSC filed an objection to Professor Chancey's analysis on their *Evolution News* site:⁸

SMU Religious Studies Professor Mark A. Chancey Attempts to Discredit Intelligent Design With Bad History

Still searching for some rhetorical crowbar to remove the "[Four Nails in Darwin's Coffin](#)," Mark A. Chancey claims ID "originated within certain religious circles and has credibility only within those same circles — mostly theologically conservative Christian groups that find aspects of evolutionary theory threatening." Readers may find his complete comments at [SMU Daily Campus](#), but whatever else may be said of his characterizations, the statement above is surely bad history and not an accurate reflection of the development of modern ID. Here is why.

The author of this objection is CSC fellow Michael Flannery. For a little background, the CSC provides this information:⁹

Michael A. Flannery is Professor and Associate Director for Historical Collections, Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences, University of Alabama at Birmingham, where he also holds adjunct appointments with the departments of history and sociology.

It is no surprise that Flannery's objections are historically-based. He continues:

If ID is measured by the yardstick of modern evolutionary theory (one could conceivably go as far back as Anaxagoras [500-428 BC] for its beginnings), then surely the idea that certain features of the natural world give evidence of having been intelligently designed rather than due to blind chance and necessity must be ascribed to Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913). Wallace believed that nature gives manifest evidence of "creative power, directive mind, and ultimate purpose." That's right, the co-discover of natural selection—indeed, the man who prompted Darwin to stop dawdling and rush his *Origin of Species* to press—believed in intelligent design! In fact, the words quoted above come from the subtitle to his grand evolutionary synthesis *The World of Life*, first published by Chapman and Hall in December of 1910. After more than sixty years of inquiry into the nature and meaning of biological processes and life itself, Wallace concluded "that they imply first, a Creative Power, which so constituted matter as to render these marvels possible; next, a directive Mind, which is demanded at every step of what we term growth, and often look upon as so simple and natural a process as to require no explanation; and, lastly, an ultimate Purpose, in the very existence of the whole vast life-world in all its long course of evolution throughout the eons of geological time." Wallace was surely no young-earth

creationist; he wasn't even Christian! And as for Wallace's politics, he declared himself a socialist in 1890, promoted land nationalization, equal rights for women, minimum wages for workers, and even a manufacturer's labeling law to protect consumers.

And he has more to say. While Professor Flannery's remarks may be factually accurate, they are also irrelevant to the issue. After many words of historical explanation, the truth remains that the CSC's Intelligent Design movement produces next to nothing in the way of original scientific research, provides no substantial evidence to support Intelligent Design and relies almost exclusively on propaganda and rhetoric to promote their ideas, Flannery's response being a prime example of said propaganda and rhetoric. And, yes, Intelligent Design, as promoted by the CSC, is religiously-based and has no scientific merit.

The current course of the CSC's attacks on evolution and on science in general has taken an ominous turn within the last three years. This time it's personal.

That person is Charles Darwin, the founder of the modern concept of biological evolution. Increasingly, and particularly with the advent of the Expelled video in 2008, Darwin, personally, has come into the cross-hairs of the creationists' assault. It will take a number of pages to lay out this sordid story, and that will wait for the next issue of this publication. □

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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.]

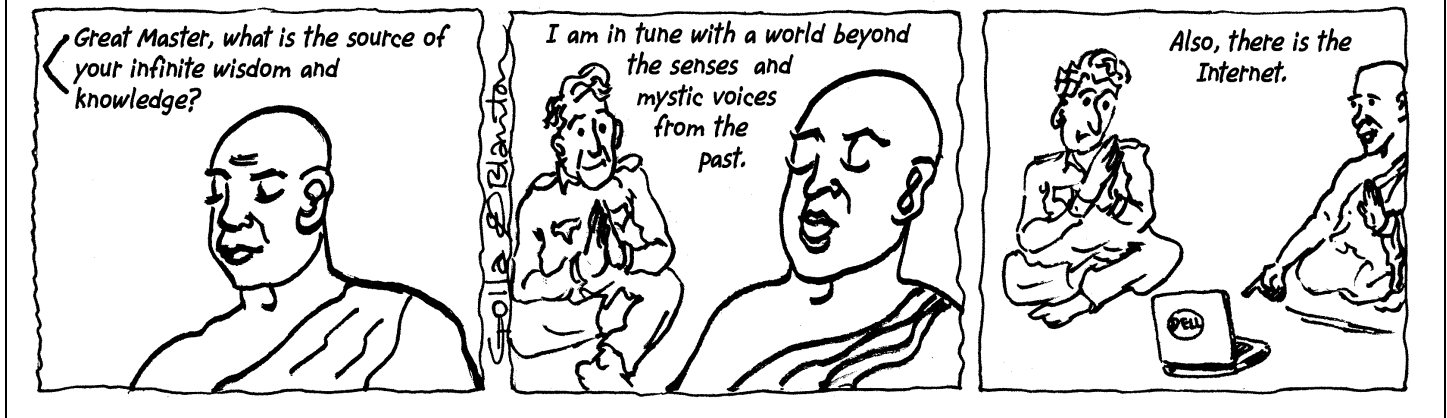
Fake bomb detector: the high cost of ignorance.

According to a story in *The Independent* (UK) on Tuesday, the investigation into the sale of fake bomb detectors has been expanded to a number of firms in the UK. It seemed comical fourteen years ago when we learned that golfers were buying fraudulent golf-ball finders (WN 12 Jan 96). The Quadro Tracker was nothing but an antenna mounted on a pistol-grip with a swivel that was free to rotate 360. An almost imperceptible deviation of the swivel from horizontal would cause the antenna to rotate to its lowest point under the force of gravity. To a credulous observer it might seem to be controlled by some mysterious external force. Quadro soon began marketing them to law enforcement agencies and the Department of Defense for \$995 each to search for drugs and weapons. After it failed a simple test, Sandia National Labs dissected one and found it contained no internal parts. The FBI shut Quadro down and arrested its officers (WN 26 Jan 96). However, the device soon reappeared in the UK as the ADE 651, sold by ATSC for prices as high as \$48,000. As WN reported (WN 29 Jan 2010), at least 1,500 were sold to the government of Iraq as bomb detectors at a cost of millions of dollars. Reliance on the fake bomb detectors reportedly contributed to hundreds of bomb deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, including British and American troops.

Magical thinking: dowsing is not illegal in the US or the UK.

In spite of the heinous nature of the ATSC crime, it may be difficult to obtain a conviction. The defense of those charged with selling fake bomb detectors will be that they believe the devices work. The defense can point to the hundreds or thousands of people who openly market their services to dowse for water or other substances. Sometimes called water-witching, dowsing is said to rely on supernatural influence over the muscles of the person holding a willow fork or an ADE 651. Dowsing doesn't always work, but what does? The prosecution will find itself hip deep in arguments over how dowsing differs from prayer. Magical thinking will be with us until we teach our children that observable effects result only from physical causes. It must be taught when they are learning their first language.

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Lies: the animal that talks often tells lies.

This week in a Tennessee court, the defendant sought to use new fMRI results to demonstrate his veracity. Polygraph results are not admissible in court for the simple reason that the polygraph doesn't work. However, WN pointed out four years ago that fMRI can, to a limited extent, tell what a person is thinking about (WN 23 Jun 2006). This might have some value in interrogation; however we would oppose its use in court. The only thing worse than a lie detector that doesn't work, would be one that does. It would be the ultimate invasion of privacy.

Cell phones: do the laws of nature trump epidemiology?

I don't like cell phones and I don't like writing about cell phones but the damned issue just won't go away. It generates more mail than any other issue. I have explained in irrefutable detail why individual microwave photons do not create mutant strands of DNA. Yes, but microwaves do cook meat even though they can't break chemBonds directly. They start them vibrating, which means the atoms get hot. How hot? Not very. First of all, cell phones do not emit a lot of energy. Secondly, evolution found ways to keep our brain cool even if we go hatless under a summer sun, and run marathons besides. Heatstroke is rare. We hardly even run a fever. We have a great coolant called blood and capillaries that quickly expand to increase the flow rate if needed.

Cell phones: long-awaited cancer study released this week.

No link to brain cancer was found in a 10 year, \$14 million epidemiological study of cell phone use in 13 countries (the US was not among them); the study was led by the World Health Organization (WHO). So is it safe to use cell phones? Uh, the

report doesn't exactly say, instead it concludes that "more study is needed." On the contrary, the WHO study itself was not needed. I remind you that flawed epidemiology led to the great power-line scare more than 20 years ago. Publicized by a series of ignorant articles in the *New Yorker* (<http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN89/wn082589.html>), it was a costly diversion that morphed into the cell-phone scare on *Larry King Live* (<http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN93/wn012993.html>). Epidemiology is a useful tool for identifying possible environmental hazards, but it is not science, or a substitute for science. The science of electromagnetic radiation is clear: photons with energies below the photoelectric threshold (extreme blue-end of the visible spectrum) are not cancer agents. The energy of the photoelectron threshold is about 1 million times the energy of a microwave photon. Blueberry consumption would have a greater chance of being linked to cancer. Even as I send this off, however, my mail is full of warnings from nonscientists about the dangers of cell phones.

COSMOS: an acronym I am at present unable to decipher.

The WHO study that prompted the board's decision seemed to settle nothing. Indeed, even as the non-results were announced, still another mobile phone study, the COSMOS cohort study of health effects in five European countries, to be carried out at Imperial College London over a period of thirty-years was announced. It must be a joke, in 30 years the technology will be completely different.

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

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