



The North Texas

Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

They're baaack

by John Blanton

Two years ago we were contacted by Greg Nichols and Greg Willis. Initially, Nichols sent an e-mail: ¹

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

Sincerely,
Greg Nichols

Nichols dropped by our 2004 February meeting and showed us a remarkable product. He applied small amounts to the outside of his drink container (we had moved the meeting to a Taco Bell because of the snow). This amazing product caused the drink to taste better. How could that be? We were eager to test this incredible product and to pay off on the \$12,000 prize if it really worked. ²

Alas, reality eventually set in. Then things got nasty. Nichols and Willis concluded our dialog with the following: ³

In the mean time, we're selling all the product we can make — because it works. The Free Market is the Final Arbiter of Truth. Not you. Not me. This is a lesson you need to learn or you've wasted a perfectly good life.

Grow up. Have a good time. Do something positive for a change. You'll all be happier and you might even improve the world instead of tearing others down to make yourselves look taller.

We'll be in touch.
Greg Willis/Greg Nichols

Of course we were stung by this harsh appraisal. Then we remembered we had been called worse by better, and we eventually got on with our lives.

How come I keep thinking about a book by Peter Benchley and that disturbing theme music from a 1970's movie? Just when you think he's gone, the big fish comes back.

EVENTS CALENDAR

Saturday, June 10,
2 p.m., at: The Center for
Nonprofit Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Fine Tuning

What does "fine tuning" have to do with creationism?

Used to be nothing, but as creationists lose ground on the fronts of geology and paleontology, they are turning to cosmology, or more exactly, cosmogeny. Is the universe fine tuned for life? Does a remarkable combination of physical circumstances point to an Intelligent Designer? The divinity of Jesus?

John Brandt will give the
lowdown.

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Saturday, 24 June 2006
7 p.m.
NTS Social Dinner
Good Eats 6950 Greenville
Avenue in Dallas

Check the **NTS Hotline** at
214-335-9248.

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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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I received the following e-mail:

Dear Mr. Blanton,

I am now ready to take you up on your challenge at
<http://www.ntskeptics.org/>. As you recall, my company makes a
 homeopathically prepared remedy made from Minerals and
 herbs in water that you can spray on the outside of a corked wine
 bottle and change the chemistry of the wine inside the bottle.

We contacted you about this approximately 2 1/2 years ago but
 you refused to put your [then] \$10,000 prize money in a escrow
 account to prove your offer was legitimate. I see that you now
 are offering \$12,000. To prove this claim, there is a very simple
 test that anyone can do and anyone can follow, under controlled
 laboratory procedures or on the street. We'll allow you to take
 some tap water and any other water you wish and fill as many
 bottles as you want with spray tops or whatever, then spray a bot-
 tle of wine, or a glass of wine if you like. Then we'll let you take
 our stuff and spray a bottle of wine. Very simple. Take a sample
 before and a sample after. Send them to a qualified wine lab
 such as ETS Laboratories in St. Helena, Napa Valley, CA and
 have them tested and certified. If the chemistry is not different,
 then you win. If it is, I win the \$12,000. This can easily be done
 as a controlled double-blind study on as many samples as you
 like.

Now, if you are truly legitimate, this time you WILL put your
 \$12,000 in escrow and make it legally available to be paid to the
 completion of this test. If you accept my challenge, and AFTER
 you put your money in the hands of a third party, through my at-
 torney, we will begin making the necessary arrangements for the
 test starting with a written legal agreement detailing the condi-
 tions signed by both parties.

Since you still have a website and appear to be in business, I as-
 sume that THIS TIME you will make a legitimate offer and will
 not, as before, back out.

The favor of your reply is requested.

Greg Willis

McKinney, TX

OK. That was a refreshing dash of cold water. I responded in our
 standard style:

Mr. Willis,

It is so good to hear from you again. Your proposal sounds in-
 teresting, and I am eager to work with you on it. I will forward
 this to the other underwriters. I am sure they will be eager, as
 well.

Yes, we still offer the prize, and it is at \$12,000. We are still
 willing to pay for a successful test.

We will not be putting the prize in escrow. Escrow is typically
 employed when both parties have something at risk. E.g., if I

were buying a house, and I had to put up a deposit. The seller would be at risk (he is taking his house off the market), and my deposit would be at risk. Hence the escrow.

Since you are not at risk, there is no requirement we put \$12,000 in escrow. The \$12,000 is in our bank accounts, and I am willing to write a check for \$12,000 at the start of a formal test. I will hold the check in my pocket during that time if it's all right with you.

I regret we cannot afford to pay for a laboratory analysis of the wine (or other liquid). As we originally discussed this, the difference should be apparent to the drinker. However, if you can propose some other kind of test we will be willing to entertain your suggestion.

Please send us a sample of your product in the mean time. Also, send instructions on how to use it.

Again review the NTS Challenge protocol at the following link:

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

We will follow this process, including some preliminary examinations to determine whether there is anything to test. We will determine when and if a test is due. All correspondence involving the NTS Challenge is subject to publication in our newsletter and on our Web site. This correspondence will be published.

Thank you for your consideration,

John Blanton

Mr. Willis was kind enough to answer, and he provided his own analysis:

Dear Mr. Blanton,

Before we start, your record of being disingenuous and dishonest guides me to do the following before we begin:

First, you will put your prize money, if it indeed does exist, in the hands of a third party or it ends there. I don't trust that you have the money, all your assurances aside.

Secondly, this test will be performed in the presence of me and my associates, yourselves plus any responsible third party or parties we both agree on. This will keep you honest, which as I said, has been a problem for you.

Third, the ONLY way we will conduct this challenge is to have the chemical analysis, preferably a phenolic panel, performed by a reputable laboratory, before treatment and after treatment. That way, we are both assured that an objective third party has analyzed the results and they can be certified and verified.

If you and your associates are legitimate and not frauds, if you are not dishonest, you will agree to this proposal.

Fourth, NOTHING gets done until my attorney has contacted you and he is satisfied that the test will be honest, legitimate, performed by an objective third party (not you or your associates at the North Texas Skeptics Society), the money actually exists and the contract is signed by all parties.

And last, YOU will pay for the tests. It's YOUR challenge, not mine. You pay the Piper if you want to dance. The cost about \$150 each. I'm sure that anyone who can afford to put up \$12,000 can afford a measly \$300 to prove themselves right.

Right?

This is not what we talked about originally specifically because (a) your drinker's taste buds are not "educated" in the sense that they are not experienced or professional wine tasters, making the test suspect since it could be subjectively skewed your way, that is, you and your friends could lie about it and (b) in the past two years, we have learned a great deal more about our products and they are now sold and consumed worldwide. We know exactly what tests must be performed by a qualified laboratory, not you since you are NOT qualified, that will guarantee objective and accurate results.

Our claim is that our homeopathically prepared sprays will alter the chemistry of red wine in the bottle if sprayed on the outside of a corked bottle of red wine.

If you won't agree to this, then clearly, you are all frauds and your "challenge" is likewise a fraud. In which case, we will report you to the proper authorities for prosecution.

Greg Willis

Unfortunately I had to remind Mr. Willis that we are not willing to pay for expensive tests. We really are a cheap lot. We can put up a prize for \$12,000, because we never have to pay off. A person will have to do the impossible in order to win the prize, and zero times \$12,000 is still \$0.00. I've got that much money in my pocket all the time.

Mr. Willis had objected that my (our) own taste buds would be faulty and would not produce a reliable test. I generously offered to allow Nichols and Willis to perform the test with *their* taste buds. I may never know how this suggestion was received.

I am a bit slow sometimes, but I managed to pick up that Mr. Willis called me a fraud. I didn't know whether or not to feel honored, and I remarked on this in my response.

We have had no further word from Mr. Nichols and Mr. Willis. Nor from the “proper authorities.”



References

- 1 Challenge activity in The North Texas Skeptic, March 2004.
<http://www.ntskeptics.org/2004/2004march/march2004.htm>
- 2 See details on the NTS Paranormal Challenge at
<http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/challenge.htm>.
- 3 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/nichols/nichols.htm>

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.

Creationist discusses science with high school students

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-05-13.htm#school>

<http://www.centredaily.com/mld/centredaily/news/nation/14573356.htm>

BY TIM TOWNSEND St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Science education is important to this country's standing in the modern world, and high school science programs are finally getting some help from groups concerned about teaching real science. Take Potosi, MO, for example:

It wasn't particularly unusual that a group of bored-looking high school students were rolling their eyes Monday morning at a geeky science dude making lame jokes like "It's `amino acids,' not `mean-old acids.'"

It was, however, unusual that the teenagers were sitting in their public school's library and that the geeky dude giving them a different perspective on science was not a scientist at all, but an evangelical Christian representing an organization promoting a literal interpretation of the Genesis story.

"I'm here to talk to you today about what we know and what we don't know in the world of science," Mike Riddle, a biblical creationist from Answers in Genesis, told the first of six groups of students he addressed. "And to talk about the possibilities there."

U.S. Majority Picks Creationism over Evolution

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-05-13.htm#majority>

<http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/index.cfm/fuseaction/viewItem/itemID/11669>

Skeptics, don't close up shop just yet.

Angus Reid Global Scan : Polls & Research

(Angus Reid Global Scan) – Many American adults support the principles of creationism, according to a poll by CBS News. 53 per cent of respondents believe God created human beings in their present form.

The poll also showed “23 per cent of respondents believe human beings evolved from less advanced life forms over millions of years, but God guided this process, while 17 per cent think God had no part in the evolution of man.”

Scientists Debunk Astrology

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-05-13.htm#astrology>

http://dsc.discovery.com/news/briefs/20060424/astrology_hum_print.html

By Jennifer Viegas, Discovery News

One of the largest studies of the possible link between human traits and astrology found little, if any, connection between the traditional sun signs of the zodiac and characteristics of individuals.

The study also failed to find a basis for star signs.

“When considering the current scientific standing with respect to sun signs, it becomes clear that there is little or no truth in sun signs,” said Peter Hartmann, who led the study, which will be published in next month's *Personality and Individual Differences* journal.

Hartmann said the study did not condemn all of astrology. The conclusion is “only that the independent effect of sun signs is most likely to be irrelevant. As for the weekly horoscope based on mere sun signs, then according to the current scientific standing, there is probably more truth in the comic strips.”

Hartmann and his colleagues used computer analysis and statistical methods to study possible astrological connections between over 15,000 individuals. They derived these test subjects from two sources.

The first was the Vietnam Experience Study, which gathered information about intelligence, personality and date of birth for male military veterans. The second was the 1979 National Longitudinal Study of Youth, which included intelligence and date of birth information for males and females aged between 15 and 24 years.

If connections existed over a rate of five percent, they were considered to be valid and not the result of random links.

The scientists could find no relationship between the time and date of a person's birth and their personality traits, which the Vietnam study categorized using terms such as psychoticism, extraversion, neuroticism and social desirability.

The study did find that subjects from the Vietnam tests were slightly more stupid if they were born in the second half of the year. That would include the writer of this column.

On the other hand, the 1979 study showed subjects from the first half were more stupid. I suggest we need another study to break the tie.

Scott's "The Challenge Of Intelligent Design" available on-line

OK, Skeptics. This is an outright plug, so I am not even going to quote it. It's from the Evolution Education Update newsletter from the National Center for Science Education:

Eugenie C. Scott's "The challenge of intelligent design," originally delivered as the Society of the Study of Evolution's Public Understanding of Evolution lecture at the Evolution 2003 conference held at California State University, Chico, is now available on-line, as the QCShow Author lecture of the week for May 8, 2006. Scott explained, "Proponents of 'intelligent design' have argued that their 'theory' is distinguishable from creation science, yet convergence in philosophy, content, and methodology is apparent," and posed the questions, "Where does the ID movement stand, and what are promoters of good science education to do about it?"

The lecture was prepared for its on-line presentation with AICS Research's QCShow Author, an inexpensive authoring tool that translates PowerPoint and Adobe PDF files into high-quality audio and image slideshows at very low bandwidths, which may be displayed with the freely downloadable QCShow Player. Also available in the same format are a number of presentations from the Evolution 2003 and Evolution 2004 conferences (Elizabeth Kellogg, Susan Epperson, Michael Sanderson, and Rick Grosberg) and from the Ernst Mayr Centenary event (Douglas Futuyma, Andrew Knoll, Axel Meyer, and Ernst Mayr).

For "The challenge of intelligent design" in QCShow format, visit:

<http://aics-research.com/lotw/lotw20060508.html>

For the free downloadable QCShow Player, visit:

<http://aics-research.com/qcshow/playerhome.html>

For information about QCShow Author, visit:

<http://aics-research.com/qcshow/index.html>

For the Evolution 2003, Evolution 2004, and Mayr Centenary presentations, visit:

<http://aics-research.com/lectures/evolution/index.html>

<http://aics-research.com/lectures/ernstmayr/index.html>

Scientists Tell Baptists Earth is 6,000 Years Old

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-05-26.htm#icr>

http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=7401

This is a switch. Usually it's the other way around. Baptists telling scientists Earth is 6,000 years old. But wait! These scientists are with the Institute for Creation Research (ICR). ICR "scientists" are scientists in the same sense that Andrea Yates is a mother.

Bob Allen 05-25-06

Nearly 1,000 Virginia Baptists gathered last Saturday for a day-long conference aimed at proving the Earth was created by God and is about 6,000 years old.

Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia and First Baptist Church of Roanoke co-sponsored the "Thousands ... Not Billions" conference, featuring creation scientists from the Institute for Creation Research in El Cajon, Calif.

"Even most Christians believe the Earth has been around for millions or even billions of years and that the Bible really isn't accurate when it talks about when God created the Earth," Larry Vardiman, professor of atmospheric science, told worshippers at Roanoke First Baptist the Sunday morning following the conference.

"Most Christians believe that God created, but they have a very fuzzy idea about how that was done and when it was done," Vardiman said in a sermon archived on the First Baptist Church Web site. "And after a while you begin to lose confidence in the Scriptures."

Established in 1970, the ICR conducts research, publication and teaching to challenge traditional science's interpretation that the universe is billions of years old and that life is the result of evolution.

You can bone up on the latest from the ICR at their Web site at <http://www.icr.org/>. My favorite reading is the *Impact* series, in publication since March 1973. Authors include, besides

Vardiman, the late Henry Morris, Wendell Bird, Steven A. Austin, Andrew Snelling, and the indomitable John Woodmorappe.

Conservative win: Court tosses out evolution ruling in Georgia

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-05-26.htm#win>

<http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=23339>

Heads up, skeptics. You can't take the weekend off.

Too bad the Founding Fathers didn't write the Constitution to prohibit stupidity by public officials. About all they could do is to provide the First Amendment, which prohibits public officials from using their office to advocate religion. Whenever religion and stupidity intersect we seem to get a break.

A federal appeals court in Georgia has failed to see that intersection, and it has overturned a ruling by a lower court that evolution disclaimers stuck in Cobb County textbooks *do* advocate religion.

May 26, 2006 By Erin Roach Baptist Press

ATLANTA (BP)—A federal appeals court May 25 rejected a lower court ruling on the constitutionality of evolution disclaimers in the form of stickers in 35,000 textbooks in a Cobb County, Ga., school district, vacating the decision based on insufficient evidence.

The three-judge panel for the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta unanimously concluded that the case needed to return to U.S. District Judge Clarence Cooper because "unfilled gaps in the record" kept them from understanding how Cooper arrived at his decision in January 2005.

"Everyone agrees that some evidence presented to the district court has been omitted from the record on appeal, but the attorneys have not been able to identify what was omitted," Judge Ed Carnes wrote for the panel. "The problems presented by a record containing significant evidentiary gaps are compounded because at least some key findings of the district court are not supported by the evidence that is contained in the record."

While Judge Cooper's decision was under appeal the stickers were scrubbed from the school texts, and stupidity took a breather. Now the size-one hats are back on top, and their supporters are beating the drums.

Casey Luskin, an attorney with the Discovery Institute, a national think tank that regularly poses scientific challenges to Darwinian evolution, called the decision a victory and said new evidentiary hearings could com-

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton.
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pletely change the trial court's original ruling against the school district.

"This is a major step towards a bigger victory for students, school districts and objective science education," he said in a news release May 25.

"A final ruling in this case will be at least as important, if not more important, than the Dover school district case last year," added Luskin, co-author of "Traipsing Into Evolution Intelligent Design and the Kitzmiller vs. Dover Decision." "Eventually it's likely that a decision will be handed down from this federal appellate court governing legal decisions in multiple states, whereas the Kitzmiller decision was from a trial court with no legal force outside of the parties in that local case."

Intelligent Design supporters are hoping a second trial at the district level will settle the issue firmly in their favor. The rest of us can hope not.

Bloomberg Criticizes Faith-based Science

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-05-26.htm#bloomberg>

<http://www.nysun.com/pf.php?id=33432>

What's this? For the second time in a month the world has been turned upside down. A conservative Republican mayor has come out *against* creationism. Creationists can take heart that this was not a well-known mayor of a major city.

BY JILL GARDINER - Staff Reporter of the Sun

May 26, 2006 URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/33432>

By warning a graduating class of doctors to reject "faith-based science," Mr. Bloomberg yesterday signaled yet again that he plans to use his second term to take the national stage.

The mayor railed against letting "ideology get in the way of truth," and singled out creationism, global warming, and stem cell research as topics where science is under attack.

Of course, the Discovery Institute took heart at this turn of events. No, wait. I got that one backwards, too. Here's what Bruce Chapman posted on Discovery's Web site:

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2006/05/bloombergs_blooper_its_a_beaut.html

Bloomberg's Blooper; it's a "Beaut"

... Bloomberg's Blooper came as a part of an attack against "faith based science" and "political science", which he illustrated by pointing to those presumably benighted religious wackos who oppose embryonic stem cell research (the same crackpot Bible thumpers who oppose abortion, one supposes; in short, about half the country outside Manhattan). The former wizard of Wall Street news may know something about politicians who refuse to face scientific facts. But what does he know about "faith based science"?



Blog debate

Have an issue with something in this newsletter? Not comfortable with our take on astrology, creationism, Big Foot?

Good. You're on.

You can debate these matters with real skeptics (not the phony kind). We will post your statements and our responses (and your responses and on and...) on the NTS blog.

How do you get started? Just send us an e-mail or post a comment on the blog. We will take it from there. Then get your "facts" together, and let the games begin.

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