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COMMENTARY

Helping Out Darwin's Cause With a Little Pointed Humor

By CORNELIA DEAN Published: December 27, 2005

The regular armies of science have long marshaled heavy intellectual weapons in their battle to keep creationism and its cousin, intelligent design, out of the nation's public schools.

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Zygote Games

In Bone Wars, players become paleontologists trying to win prestige.

When they take these weapons into the nation's courtrooms, they win - again and again. Their victory in Dover, Pa., last week was only the latest of a string going at least as far back as 1987 when the Supreme Court ruled in Edwards v. Aguillard that creationism was a religious view, not science.

But as many of the nation's science teachers know only too well, repeated declarations from the bench do not necessarily trump community pressure in a country where, surveys show, only a minority accepts Darwinian

evolution.

So now guerrilla forces are joining the fray, with an unorthodox weapon: laughter.

On Web sites, with games and in silly songs, they advance the idea that creationism and its doctrinal relative, intelligent design, are not just misguided - they are laughably misguided.

"The scientific community just isn't touching John Q. Public," said Donald U. Wise, an emeritus professor of geology at the University of Massachusetts. "We just have to find a way of breaking through. The only way we will do that is with humor."

Dr. Wise's first foray is a parody song about intelligent design called "Marching Song of the Incompetents," which had its premiere in October when hundreds of geologists sang it enthusiastically at the otherwise conventional meeting of the Geological Society of America.

Another scientist at the University of Massachusetts, Diane Kelly, an adjunct professor of biology, is a founder of Zygote Games, a new company whose first product, "Bone Wars: The Game of Ruthless Paleontology," involves players who compete to reconstruct dinosaurs, learning as they go about how scientific theories are developed.

Because school officials in Kansas have redefined "science" so as to include intelligent design in the state's curriculum, the company offers the game at a 20 percent discount to residents of the state (zygotegames.com).

After the Kansas decision, Bobby Henderson, who variously describes himself as a concerned citizen, amateur pirate and a person of negligible education, created the on-line Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which holds that "an invisible and undetectable Flying Spaghetti Monster created the universe." This dogma is no less worthy of inclusion

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in science classes than intelligent design, the F.S.M. movement asserts on Mr. Henderson's Web site, [venganza.org](http://venganza.org).

Even Doonesbury has gotten into the act. In a recent strip, a doctor and patient confer over how to treat the patient's newly diagnosed [tuberculosis](#). If the patient is a creationist, the doctor says, he might want drugs used decades ago against the disease. If he believes in evolution, though, he might want newer drugs, "intelligently designed," the doctor notes, to match the TB microbe's evolving resistance to the earlier drug.

Dr. Wise's avowed goal is to use the techniques of [Karl Rove](#) and other conservative image-meisters to replace the phrase "intelligent design" in the public mind with one he thinks is more apt, "incompetent design."

His song describes some of the ills to which the human body is prey, all of which result from the way evolution produced Homo sapiens from our hairier hominid ancestors. It notes for example that the spine, well-adapted to four-footed locomotion or even knuckle-dragging, has doomed primates to ruptured disks and lower back pain ever since they began walking on two feet. And people suffering from crooked teeth or sinus trouble can thank the way the large human brain evolved and expanded to crowd the mammalian skull.

The song, to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic," goes like this:

*My bones proclaim a story of incompetent design  
My back still hurts, my sinus clogs, my teeth just won't align  
If I had drawn the blueprint I would certainly resign  
Incompetent Design!  
Evo-Evo-Evolution. Design is but a mere illusion  
Darwin sparked our revolution. Science shall prevail!*

Dr. Wise said he wrote the song "when I was invited to give a talk at the G.S.A. meeting on how to deal with incompetent - excuse me - intelligent design."

"I tried to set up how would you run this as a political campaign. It needs slogans, bumper stickers - but then you need a song to go with it," he continued.

When he displayed the lyrics at the G.S.A. meeting, the scientists started singing along. "Everybody was out of sync," Dr. Wise said. "It was just gloriously miserable."

"The legions of reason have done very well in scientific arguments," said Dr. Wise, who has advanced a few himself in learned journals like *American Scientist*. "But this isn't where the battle is being fought."

Dr. Kelly conceded that most Kansas customers for *Bone Wars* had been "people who are pretty appalled by the Board of Education vote."

"I had one person call to order and assure me they were not all like that out there," he continued.

And it is always possible that making fun of creationism and intelligent design will offend so many people it will end up doing evolution more harm than good. As one posting on the *venganza* site put it, "It is a serious offense to mock God."

But for Dr. Wise, like many other scientists, religion is apart from science. "It's untestable and, worse than that, it conjures up in the public mind that this is a battle between science and religion," he said.

He does not worry much about whether some will find his song offensive. "The main bulk of the American public is the target, and for them humor and a bit of evidence will convince them." So he is thinking about what aspect of creationism to tackle next.

"One of the directions I may want to go," he said, "is trying to show the stupidity of the arguments of thermodynamics making evolution impossible," which some creationists argue. The overall goal, he said, is to get creationist ideas "into popular culture as something you laugh at."

He added, "We need more spaghetti monsters, I think."



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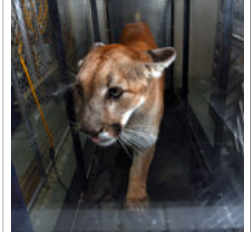
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