

The Center for Inquiry Office of Public Policy

Background

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A New Initiative

The methods of the sciences are being challenged culturally in the United States today as never before. Despite the success of scientific naturalism in providing us with unparalleled benefits, religious fundamentalists and some postmodernists seek to inhibit free inquiry and to misrepresent the tested conclusions of scientific naturalism. This is a highly charged political issue—both science and secularism are under attack. While a number of organizations lobby and work to defend science politically, so far, no organization has worked to defend scientific naturalism more generally, in all important areas of human endeavor.

Because the Center for Inquiry is the only organization broadly defending and promoting science, reason, and secular humanism, with an agenda entirely built upon the success of scientific naturalism, we are well positioned to enter the public policy arena. Washington, D.C., is now the central arena where these debates are occurring, and we must be at front and center, defending science, reason, and secularism where the debate is most charged. We have been leading advocates in these areas and have assembled a wide network of experts who can address the public-policy issues related to our agenda. We plan to bring that network and expertise to the nation's capital. We are the world's foremost think tank of scientific naturalism and must address its defense where attacks have been most destructive and visible: in U.S. law and public policy.

The Center for Inquiry's Office of Public Policy will seek to develop relationships with legislators in D.C. and will bring its experts to testify in legislative hearings. We will submit white papers, solicited from our network of fellows and scientists, and work with legislators who care about science and reason to effect legislative responses to attacks on secular values. We will be positioned in D.C. to provide rapid response via public statements, press conferences, and action alerts directed at public policy. The Office of Public Policy will serve as liaison to our nation's government and friendly legislators, to see that every available means is used to defend and promote science, reason, and free inquiry. The Office of Public Policy also will delve into upcoming legislation, undertake appropriate research on bills that relate to our agenda, and coordinate press, legal, and scholarly responses to legislation. We will maintain an office in D.C. as a branch of the Center for Inquiry, out of which programming and public-policy initiatives will be implemented through both local and national support.

Our goals are to:

- Identify sympathetic legislators and begin forging relationships with them;

- Provide experts to give testimony in congress;
- Work on language in upcoming bills related to the above issues;
- Hold nationally televised press conferences on breaking issues;
- Submit *amicus* briefs in relevant Supreme Court cases.

Production and Distribution of Position Papers

The Office of Public Policy will pursue an aggressive schedule in the production and publishing of position papers. Position papers on the following issues will be published in 2006:

- Stem Cell Research: An Approach to Bioethics Based on Scientific Naturalism (Ronald A. Lindsay, Ph.D., J.D.), released on July 26, 2006; available at www.centerforinquiry.net/StemCell.pdf
- The Importance of Education about the Scientific Method (Matthew C. Nisbet, Ph.D.)
- Ethics and Genetic Engineering (David Koepsell, Ph.D., J.D.)
- The Separation of Church and State (Edward Tabash, J.D.)
- Global Warming and Climate Change (Stuart Jordan, Ph.D.)
- Abstinence Policies/Programs (Margaret B. Brown, Ph.D.)
- Evolution and Intelligent Design (Barbara Forrest, Ph.D.)

Challenges

The foundations of our democratic society are now under fire. The social and scientific progress we take for granted have been advanced by a basic scientific philosophical point of view: scientific naturalism. Since the advent of the age of science, evidence-based inquiry has developed solutions to human problems. And this has resulted in increased standards of living, life-extending technologies, international institutions for cooperation, and the everyday conveniences of modern living. Scientific naturalism has been central to our understanding of the universe. Empirical research into the physical world has allowed us to develop more precise theories about the origins of life and has given us insights into where we come from and where we may be going as a planet and as a species. Unfortunately, these scientific methods and the assumptions upon which they are based are under heavy attack in the United States.

Recently, several public-policy controversies have illustrated the public need for the Center for Inquiry's broad expertise in scientific naturalism. The intelligent-design controversy culminated in the Dover, Pennsylvania, lawsuit but continues through local and state attempts to dilute science curricula. It is not only a scientific dispute but part of a broader cultural war on scientific naturalism. The judge in that case explicitly recognized this fact, citing the so-called "wedge" document drafted by the Discovery Institute, which lists an ultimate goal of supplanting scientific naturalism with supernatural theology. Some twenty state legislatures now have bills before them mandating that "Intelligent Design" be taught in science classrooms.

More recently, NASA was embroiled in a public controversy when a politically appointed spokesperson began insisting that references to the Big Bang be diluted with language indicating that NASA took no position on whether the Big Bang actually happened and that it was only a "theory." Under intense criticism, that spokesperson resigned, but not before calling attention to the dangers of mixing science, religion, and politics.

Finally, underpinning the problems is the increasing political influence of the Religious Right. The separation of church and state, guaranteed by the First Amendment, has been a

primary means of protecting scientific and rational solutions to human problems in the public sphere. Without undue influence from religious orthodoxy, scientific and rational approaches to human and social problems flourished. But recently, the same forces seeking to undermine scientific methodology are trying to erode the basis of our secular republic.

The Future

The Center for Inquiry's Office of Public Policy differs from such organizations as the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, and the Cato Institute in that ours is the only think tank committed solely to science, reason, and secularism as the critical building blocks of American Democracy. CFI also publishes two magazines, *FREE INQUIRY* and the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*.

The Office of Public Policy stands ready to provide the media and the American public with background, from a wide variety of experts in the physical and social sciences, on all major political issues.

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- **Barry Karr:** Executive Director, Center for Inquiry/Transnational
- **Elizabeth Daerr:** Executive Director, Center for Inquiry/Washington, D.C.
- **Toni Van Pelt:** Policy Director, Center for Inquiry/Office of Public Policy
- **Ronald A. Lindsay, Ph.D., J.D.:** Legal Director, Center for Inquiry/Transnational
- **Stuart D. Jordan, Ph.D.:** Senior Staff Scientist, Laboratory for Astronomy and Solar Physics, NASA
- **David Koepsell, Ph.D., J.D.:** Executive Director, Council for Secular
- **Chris Mooney:** author
- **Matthew Nisbet, Ph.D.:** Assistant Professor (Communications), American University
- **Edward Tabash, J.D.:** Chair, First Amendment Task Force

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