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Editor Explains Reasons for 'Intelligent Design' Article

By Michael Powell
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Evolutionary biologist Richard Sternberg made a fateful decision a year ago.

As editor of the hitherto obscure Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington, Sternberg decided to publish a paper making the case for "intelligent design," a controversial theory that holds that the machinery of life is so complex as to require the hand -- subtle or not -- of an intelligent creator.

Within hours of publication, senior scientists at the Smithsonian Institution -- which has helped fund and run the journal -- lashed out at Sternberg as a shoddy scientist and a closet Bible thumper.

"They were saying I accepted money under the table, that I was a crypto-priest, that I was a sleeper cell operative for the creationists," said Steinberg, 42, who is a Smithsonian research associate. "I was basically run out of there."

An independent agency has come to the same conclusion, accusing top scientists at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History of retaliating against Sternberg by investigating his religion and smearing him as a "creationist."

The U.S. Office of Special Counsel, which was established to protect federal employees from reprisals, examined e-mail traffic from these scientists and noted that "retaliation came in many forms . . . misinformation was disseminated through the Smithsonian Institution and to outside sources. The allegations against you were later determined to be false."

"The rumor mill became so infected," James McVay, the principal legal adviser in the Office of Special Counsel, wrote to Sternberg, "that one of your colleagues had to circulate [your résumé] simply to dispel the rumor that you were not a scientist."

The Washington Post and two other media outlets obtained a copy of the still-private report.

McVay, who is a political appointee of the Bush administration, acknowledged in the report that a fuller response from the Smithsonian might have tempered his conclusions. As Sternberg is not a Smithsonian employee -- the National Institutes of Health pays his salary -- the special counsel lacks the power to impose a legal remedy.

A spokeswoman for the Smithsonian Institution declined comment, noting that it has not received McVay's report.

"We do stand by evolution -- we are a scientific organization," said Linda St. Thomas, the spokeswoman. An official privately suggested that McVay might want to embarrass the institution.

It is hard to overstate the passions fired by the debate over intelligent design. President Bush recently said that schoolchildren should learn about the theory alongside Darwin's theory of evolution -- a view that goes beyond even the stance of intelligent design advocates. Dozens of state school boards have attempted to mandate the teaching of anti-Darwinian theories.

A small band of scientists argue for intelligent design, saying evolutionary theory's path is littered with too many gaps and mysteries, and cannot account for the origin of life.

Most evolutionary biologists, not to mention much of the broader scientific community, dismiss intelligent design as a sophisticated version of creationism. To teach it in science classes, they say, would be to overturn hundreds of years of scientific progress. The National Museum of Natural History was drawn into this controversy in June, when protest forced it to withdraw from co-sponsorship of a documentary on intelligent design.

Sternberg's case has sent ripples far beyond the Beltway. The special counsel accused the National Center for Science Education, an Oakland, Calif.-based think tank that defends the teaching of evolution, of orchestrating attacks on Sternberg.

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"The NCSE worked closely with" the Smithsonian "in outlining a strategy to have you investigated and discredited," McVay wrote to Sternberg.

NCSE officials accused McVay of playing out a political agenda. "I must say that Mr. McVay flatters us beyond our desserts -- the Smithsonian is a distinguished organization of highly competent scientists, and they're not marionettes," said Eugenie Scott, the group's executive director. "If this was a corporation, and an employee did something that really embarrassed the administration, really blew it, how long do you think that person would be employed?"

Risky Decision

Sternberg is an unlikely revolutionary. He holds two PhDs in evolutionary biology, his graduate work draws praise from his former professors, and in 2000 he gained a coveted research associate appointment at the Smithsonian Institution.

Not long after that, Smithsonian scientists asked Sternberg to become the unpaid editor of *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*, a sleepy scientific journal affiliated with the Smithsonian. Three years later, Sternberg agreed to consider a paper by Stephen C. Meyer, a Cambridge University-educated philosopher of science who argues that evolutionary theory cannot account for the vast profusion of multicellular species and forms in what is known as the Cambrian "explosion," which occurred about 530 million years ago.

Scientists still puzzle at this great proliferation of life. But Meyer's paper went several long steps further, arguing that an intelligent agent -- God, according to many who espouse intelligent design -- was the best explanation for the rapid appearance of higher life-forms.

Sternberg harbored his own doubts about Darwinian theory. He also acknowledged that this journal had not published such papers in the past and that he wanted to stir the scientific pot.

"I am not convinced by intelligent design but they have brought a lot of difficult questions to the fore," Sternberg said. "Science only moves forward on controversy."

He mailed Meyer's article to three scientists for a peer review. It has been suggested that Sternberg fabricated the peer review or sought unqualified scientists, a claim McVay dismissed.

"They were critical of the paper and gave 50 things to consider," Sternberg said. "But they said that people are talking about this and we should air the views."

When the article appeared, the reaction was near instantaneous and furious. Within days, detailed scientific critiques of Meyer's article appeared on pro-evolution Web sites. "The origin of genetic information is thoroughly understood," said Nick Matzke of the NCSE. "If the arguments were coherent this paper would have been revolutionary-- but they were bogus."

A senior Smithsonian scientist wrote in an e-mail: "We are evolutionary biologists and I am sorry to see us made into the laughing stock of the world, even if this kind of rubbish sells well in backwoods USA."

An e-mail stated, falsely, that Sternberg had "training as an orthodox priest." Another labeled him a "Young Earth Creationist," meaning a person who believes God created the world in the past 10,000 years.

This latter accusation is a reference to Sternberg's service on the board of the Baraminology Study Group, a "young Earth" group. Sternberg insists he does not believe in creationism. "I was rather strong in my criticism of them," he said. "But I agreed to work as a friendly but critical outsider."

Scott, of the NCSE, insisted that Smithsonian scientists had no choice but to explore Sternberg's religious beliefs. "They don't care if you are religious, but they do care a lot if you are a creationist," Scott said. "Sternberg denies it, but if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it argues for zealotry."

Endgame

Sternberg has seen stress piled upon stress in the past year. His marriage has dissolved, and he no longer comes into the Smithsonian. When the biological society issued a statement disavowing Meyer's article, Sternberg was advised not to attend. "I was told that feelings were running so high, they could not guarantee me that they could keep order," Sternberg said.

A former professor of Sternberg's says the researcher has an intellectual penchant for going against the system. Sternberg does not deny it.

"I loathe careerism and the herd mentality," he said. "I really think that objective truth can be discovered and that popular opinion and consensus thinking does more to obscure than to reveal."

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