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Disputed August 2005

# Evolutionists blast editor over 'intelligent design' article

By **Michael Powell**  
THE WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON — 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, 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: "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 resume) simply to dispel the

rumor that you were not a scientist." Sternberg holds two doctorates in biology.

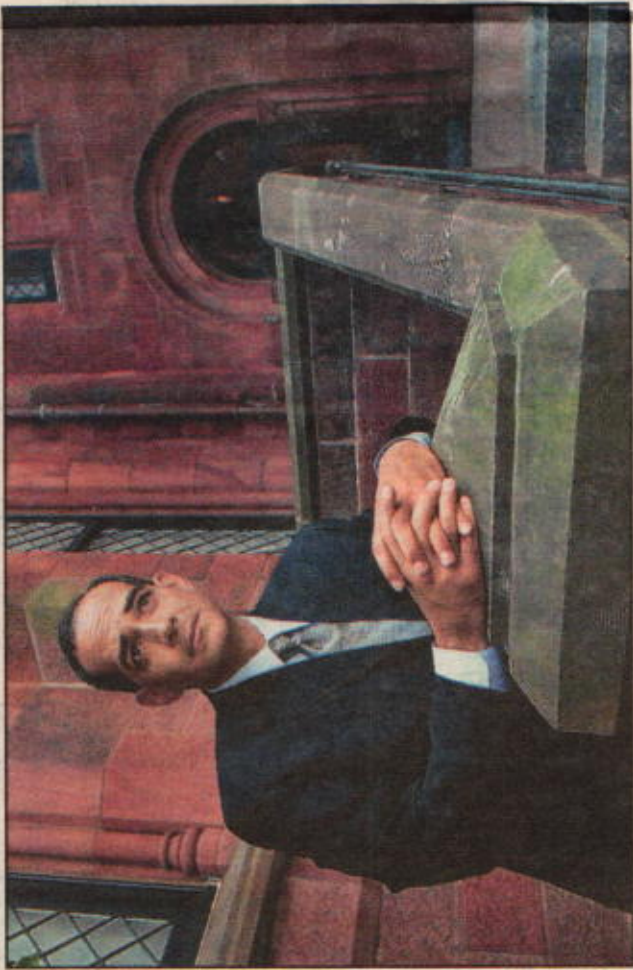
McVay, who is a political appointee of the Bush administration, acknowledged in the report that a fuller response from the Smithsonian might have tempered his conclusions. As Sternberg is not a Smithsonian employee — the National Institutes of Health pays his salary — the special counsel lacks the power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

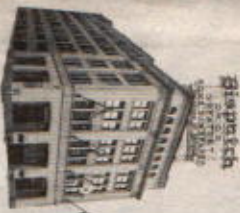
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MICHAEL WILLIAMSON | WASHINGTON POST

"Science only moves forward on controversy," says Richard Sternberg.

control our tongue and knowing when to be silent on a subject and when to share," he said. He cited two Bible verses from



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ing embers," Hays said.

Paul Nurnich, associate professor for world religions and interreligious dialogue for the Theological Consortium of Greater Columbus, sees the incident as a case study in understanding the complexity of religion.

"The issue stands, no matter what the retraction might be," Nurnich said.

When he talks to groups about religion, he starts off discussing the audience's primary faith, generally Christianity.

The audience usually knows about the diversity of Christian thought and can weigh the remarks of someone like Robertson, whose place on the religious right is well-known.

"We recognize that Pat Robertson represents a certain constituency and put it in perspective," Nurnich said.

Most people don't realize that other religions also are complex with members representing diverse points of view, he said.

Although some religious leaders have steered clear of Robertson's recent remarks, he hasn't



JORGE REY / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, left, and Cuban President Fidel Castro respond to reporters' questions about Pat Robertson's call for Chavez's assassination. Chavez was interviewed Tuesday at Havana's airport just before leaving the Cuban capital for Jamaica, gotten a free pass, Nurnich said.

"Internal critique of leaders goes on in any and every religion," the professor said.

The larger issue, Nurnich said, is "violence against human beings."

"In Christian circles there is the 'just war' theory," which says that war is justified in certain instances, he said. Some churches accept such a proposition, while others reject killing of humans under any circumstances.

An example cited by many religious leaders is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran clergyman who was executed for plotting to

assassinate Adolf Hitler during World War II.

Bonhoeffer's faith, he believed, called him to remove the evil dictator.

"Christian faith calls on us to 'combat evil,' kind of like the language Robertson uses," Nurnich said.

"These kinds of debates don't surprise me in our times," Nurnich said. "We are living in some very stressful times."

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## EDITOR

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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 mar date 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 across the country. 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.

"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 deserts — 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?"

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 the intelligent-design article by Stephen C. Meyer, a Cambridge University-educated philosopher, 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."