

OPINION

EDUCATION | TEXAS

Don't mess with science standards

If today's students are to thrive, education leaders cannot pick and choose which scientific facts they want to accept.

By ALAN I. LESHNER
Special to the Star-Telegram

As Texas prepares to reconsider what youngsters statewide should know about science, the forced ouster of science curriculum director Chris Comer of the Texas Education Agency, apparently for standing up for the integrity of science education, stands as both shocking and sad. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is the official explanation for it.

Comer's forwarding of an e-mail about a lecture by Barbara Forrest, author of the book *Inside Creationism's Trojan Horse*, apparently rubbed some TEA higher-ups the wrong way. The agency must, after all, "remain neutral," according to a memo calling for Comer's termina-

tion. Agency spokeswoman Debbie Ratcliffe later went on to explain how "there's been a long-standing policy that the pros and cons of scientific theory must be taught."

These comments — suggesting that scientific facts based on indisputable physical evidence are somehow subject to debate on nonscientific grounds — are especially troubling in a state known for its innovation and filled with high-quality research universities.

Everyone has a constitutional right to interpret the origins of life based on Christian or any other doctrine. Religious discussion might be perfectly appropriate in theology or philosophy classes.

But scientific theory is based on facts, and creationism and intelligent design are not. If educators remain neutral about sticking to science in science classrooms, they will surely wind up confusing students about

the nature of science versus religion.

Evolution describes how Earth's life forms gradually arose from common ancestors, beginning with one-celled organisms billions of years ago. It is a core concept, based on robust evidence such as radiometric measurements of the ages of Earth's rocks as well as meteorites and moon rocks. These tell us that our solar system formed 4.55 billion years ago, probably after a major supernova explosion. The first life on Earth emerged between 3.5 billion and 3.8 billion years ago.

Intelligent design advocates hypothesize that some natural events and structures are so complex that they must have been the work of an intervening supernatural agent. Others believe that the universe and all its inhabitants appeared in their current forms within the past 10,000 years.

In a free country, there's room for

both religion and science. The scientific acceptance of evolution is compatible with the religious views of many Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu believers.

As geneticist Francis Collins, an evangelical Christian and director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, has said, "Faith is the way to understand questions that science can't answer, like 'Why are we all here? Why does it matter? Is there a God, and does he care about me?'"

Did Comer show poor judgment in forwarding that e-mail? Possibly — if only because former Bush administration official Lizzette Reynolds immediately demanded Comer's termination. But, the more important question is this: Should anyone in charge of science curriculum be expected to remain neutral regarding efforts to insert religious viewpoints into science classrooms? The answer is "no."

American competitiveness depends upon providing the best possible science education for all students. This point seems well-understood by business leaders and by policymakers such as U.S. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who helped pass the America COMPETES Act, authorizing the recruitment of 10,000 science and math teachers.

If today's students are to thrive, education leaders cannot pick and choose which scientific facts they want to accept. We urge the state's education leaders to help prevent children from becoming stragglers in this age of science and technology.

ALAN I. LESHNER IS THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE AND EXECUTIVE PUBLISHER OF THE JOURNAL SCIENCE.

POLITICS

If he claims to love Mom, check it out

There's an explosion of Internet sites that are looking at every aspect of the presidential race.

By JAMES KLURFELD
Newsday

I noticed with amusement recently that some colleagues who are out on the presidential campaign trail are voicing a complaint that echoed some of my own sentiments when I was on a similar assignment: They are hardly getting any opportunity to ask the candidates questions, let alone spend any quality time with them.

If anything, the reporters are saying, campaign organizations have become more controlling than ever. This complaint is especially true for the front-running candidates such as Sen. Hillary Clinton and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Reporters are lucky to get a news conference once a week, some said.

From a candidate's point of view, this is how it should be. To the politicians, there is paid media — their television and radio commercials — and free media, the coverage they get from journalists. Paid media, they can totally control. Free media, they do their very best to manipulate. And limiting access to a candidate is part of that effort. This is especially true of the traveling press, as opposed to the local press, at least in part because those who are regularly following a candidate are quicker to see contradictions or changes in position and tend to be more critical.

But there is a changing element to political coverage these days that offers voters, and reporters, more and maybe better ways to find out who these people who want to run our country are and what they have done in the past. And it might mean that traveling with the candidate is not necessarily the best or only way to cover a campaign.

I'm talking about the explosion of Internet sites that are looking at every aspect of the campaign and the candidates.

At the most basic level, you can watch a debate or interview you missed by going online to a site such as YouTube or a television network's site. You can also visit a candidate's Web site and review his or her position papers or, of course, contribute your dollars to the

campaign.

But what has really caught my interest this campaign cycle are the nonpartisan journalism sites that are quickly and thoroughly evaluating what the candidates say compared to what the facts or the historical record really are.

For instance, there is a site called PolitiFact.com, sponsored by the *St. Petersburg Times* and *Congressional Quarterly*, that runs a "Truth-O-Meter" that evaluates what candidates say on a scale of true, mostly true, half true, barely true or false.

When Sen. Barack Obama says, "I do provide universal healthcare," the meter says barely true, and you can click on to a spot that explains the difference between his healthcare plan and Clinton's in some detail. Or when Sen. John McCain says that Giuliani never took part in the Iraq Study Group and was either fired or asked to leave, the meter says, "True" and goes on to explain that the mayor missed the group's first two meetings and never participated in its work.

At FactCheck.org, there's a multimedia piece on "how to spot political ads powered only by hot air." The story contains one commercial from Republican Mitt Romney and one from Democrat John Edwards and explains how each uses positive words and images that are largely devoid of substance. "Voters should beware," it says.

There are many other sites illuminating the campaign in different ways, including Politico.com, RealClearPolitics.com and mainstream media Web sites such as those of *Newsday*, *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*.

My point isn't that it is not important for reporters to be following a campaign on a regular basis. Of course it is. They have to keep pressing for more access to candidates. But 20 years ago, we were limited to what we knew about candidates by our local newspaper or the television networks.

The Internet represents a revolution in communications, for better or worse. For the news consumer, with a little bit of effort, it is definitely better.

JAMES KLURFELD IS A COLUMNIST FOR NEWSDAY.
JKLURFEL@NEWSDAY.COM.

Political Web browser

Check out these politics sites:

- FactCheck.org, run by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, tests the truthfulness of major political players' statements.
- PolitiFact.com features the Truth-O-Meter for testing candidates' statements.
- Politico.com offers news and opinion on Congress and the 2008 campaign.
- RealClearPolitics.com has a roundup of polls in key states, as well as political news and commentary.

HUMANITY

O TIDINGS OF DISCOMFORT AND HATE

If the holidays are about deliverance, a few hours spent among the shoes of dead Jews and manifestoes of mass murder are a reminder of what we need deliverance from.

A few words before I go.

First off: Happy holidays. Merry Christmas, Happy Kwanzaa, Happy Hanukkah. Barring something unforeseen, we won't talk again until the new year. Your humble correspondent is taking a few mental health days.

It probably isn't your idea of an ideal holiday spot, but I plan to spend one of those days at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. It's something I do most years around this time, though I find it difficult to explain why.

I guess if trees strung with light, malls crowded with shoppers and Christmas music filling the air impart a sense of festivity and rightness with the world, the shadowed halls of this monument to human hatred, human hubris and human resilience impart something I find equally valuable this time of year.

Call it a centeredness. Call it a somberness. Call it a sacredness.

If the holidays are about deliverance, those hours spent among the shoes of dead Jews and manifestoes of mass murder are a stark reminder of what we need deliverance from. Our own meanness. Our own smallness. The petty cruelties whispered into us by the worst angels of our nature.

Some of you will know that I



LEONARD PITTS

had a very interesting spring and early summer. I wrote a column that some people disliked, and it led to harassment and death threats from self-styled neo-Nazis under the tired delusion that paleness of skin equals mental, moral or physical superiority. It was a striking, stinking reminder of the seemingly bottomless potential for sheer stupidity that lives within each of us. And by that I mean each of us.

As Sly and the Family Stone once memorably sang, "There is a yellow one that won't accept the black one that won't accept the red one that won't accept the white one." That's as succinct an encapsulation of the human condition as you'll ever hear.

To walk in the Holocaust Museum is to be reminded of the logical, inevitable result of that refusal to accept, that insistence upon declaring that some racial, sexual, religious or cultural fraction of us must live outside the circle of human compassion. After all,



A teacher studies an exhibit at the Holocaust Museum in 2000. MCT

there was nothing terribly new about what the Nazis did. Their sole innovation was to institutionalize hatred and mechanize murder so that 11 million people — 6 million of them Jews — could be most efficiently put to death.

But this idea that some of us are less than the rest of us — that some of us are roaches, vermin, viruses, parasites, infestations, beasts or subhumans to whom one owes no duty of human decency or commiseration — didn't start with the Nazis. It is as old as Cain. As widespread as the common cold.

Yet we don't learn, never learn. Dead Jews become dead Rwandans become dead Serbs become dead Darfurians, yet still some of us mouth pious hatreds with a smug certitude and offhand arrogance accessible only to the deeply, profoundly and utterly wrong.

I'm reminded of an older white lady who called me once

to thank me for a column decrying some racial insult. She had a grandmother voice, a voice that sounded like cookies in the oven smell, and she wanted me to know she admired black people, supported black people. Then she added in a conspiratorial whisper, "It's the Jewboys I can't stand." Everybody is sure their own hatreds are just.

We've got to live together. Sly Stone sang that, too, in his song. If that seems, almost 40 years later, a faded hope, it is nevertheless a hope, and one you clutch instinctively as shrunken Jews stare out from photos on a wall, across a gulf of 60 years. A reminder. A warning. A testimony.

And meanwhile, somewhere far away, the trees are filled with light, the air is laced with hymns of joy.

LEONARD PITTS WRITES FOR THE MIAMI HERALD.
LPITTS@HERALD.COM

CULTURE | RELIGION

TIMELY REMINDER FROM ROMNEY

This is a time when Americans need to review their nation's founding principles.

WASHINGTON — Voters might not know any more about Mormonism than they did before Mitt Romney's faith speech on Thursday, but they surely know more about what it means to be an American.

Romney's much-anticipated address from the George H.W. Bush library at Texas A&M reminded Americans of some fundamental truths that often get lost in the guerrilla warfare of presidential politics.

He made two important points clear: Freedom and religious liberty are inextricably linked. And although Romney's religion informs his life, leaders of his church will not inform his decisions as president.

That second statement is essentially a reiteration of John F. Kennedy's speech nearly 50 years ago when he had to assuage voters' fears that he would be taking orders from the pope. Like Kennedy, Romney said his commitment is to the rule of law and the Constitution.

If Kennedy's speech was an important landmark in U.S.



KATHLEEN PARKER

political history, Romney's was surpassing. With heartfelt humility and poetic eloquence, he tracked the nation's struggle with and for freedom.

He held up a mirror, and for the first time in a long while, Americans did not have to avert their gaze. They could see themselves reflected and be both proud and humbled by their country's unique beauty.

That may be the most valuable result of Romney's speech. He raised the bar by focusing on broad principles of religious freedom rather than on the small details of doctrinal differences. In the process, he elevated everyone — even those not-so-deserving.

Disappointing many, no doubt, Romney steered clear of the details of Mormon belief and deprived the boxers-or-briefs crowd an answer to the Mormon undergarment question. This was smart for Rom-

ney, but it was also a gift to the American people — a gesture of mutual respect.

Where does one begin to defend one's religious faith, anyway? And where does anyone draw the line? No religion can bear close scrutiny if we go literal.

Romney effectively neutralized these questions with his recognition that all religions have their curiosities as well as their wonders. In a nod toward pluralism, Romney noted the things he loves about other religions — "the profound ceremony of the Catholic Mass, the approachability of God in the prayers of the evangelicals, the tenderness of spirit among the Pentecostals, the confident independence of the Lutherans, the ancient traditions of the Jews, unchanged through the ages, and the commitment to frequent prayer of the Muslims."

Romney also smartly asserted commitment to his own beliefs, including that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Unapologetically, Romney said he wouldn't disavow the faith of his fathers, and if his campaign for president fails because of it, "so be it."

But why should he or anyone disavow faith to run for president? How did that idea

ever gain entry into the political arena of a country founded on the idea of religious liberty? Didn't the earliest Americans die to secure that proposition and codify it into law?

Who is to judge another's faith? And by what standard has Romney's religion failed in guiding what has clearly been an exemplary life?

The religious questions raised by Romney's candidacy have intersected (by grace, some would say) with a time when Americans needed to review their nation's founding principles and, in Romney's words, appreciate "the profound implications of our tradition of religious liberty."

As radical Islam seeks to impose theocratic tyranny — to convert by conquest — Americans can be grateful that, as Romney put it, reason and religion are allies in this country. But that relationship has always been a fragile marriage, and this presidential election seems to be testing our resolve.

Perhaps it took someone more recently persecuted for his beliefs to remind us that "religious tolerance would be a shallow principle indeed if it were reserved only for faiths with which we agree."

Indeed.
Or, as they say, amen.

KATHLEEN PARKER WRITES FOR THE WASHINGTON POST WRITERS GROUP. KPARKER@KPARKER.COM