

Scientific Inquiry by Dan Jacoby

In this essay, I'm taking time out from politics to talk about science. Well, not really.

First, I have some science news. Astronomers report that they have discovered what appears to be a rock. A really, really big rock. In fact, this rock is even bigger than Pluto, which may or may not be a planet. This rock is also orbiting the sun, in a much larger (and much more wildly eccentric) orbit than Pluto.

The question for astronomers is whether this rock is, indeed, a "planet", a "minor planet", or a "planetary body". If this rock doesn't get the full status of "planet", then can Pluto, which is much smaller, keep its status? What about two other large rocks that have been recently discovered?

While scientists ponder these questions, they can listen to the sounds of Saturn. Seriously. The scientists tracking the Cassini probe have discovered that the second-largest planet in the solar system emanates radiation in a band that can be heard as sound. (The probe is named not after fashion designer Oleg Cassini, but after Giovanni Cassini, who first figured out that Saturn had both moons and rings.)

There are plenty of people, mostly conservatives, who say that this science is irrelevant and a complete waste of money. This brings us to the third scientific announcement – that an asteroid may pass within about 22,000 miles of the Earth in 2036. That, by itself, is a big deal, but a bigger deal may be to come. It's entirely possible that this asteroid, in its next pass seven years later, will collide with the Earth, and create the kind of destruction that wiped out the dinosaurs.

Since when is science irrelevant? Remember, Nazi Germany lost the war in part because they kicked out a handful of scientists. Had Lise Meitner, Leo Szilard, and Albert Einstein been welcomed instead of exiled by the Nazis, we might be speaking German today – or worse.

Today's other scientific news is that Senate Majority Leader and accomplished heart transplant surgeon Bill Frist has decided to oppose George W. Bush's hatred of stem cell research. (I warned you politics would enter into this.) Senator Frist is already on record as believing that stem cell research is a good thing. The difference is that now, after years of kowtowing to the party line, he's pushing for more federal funding.

Putting aside for the moment the fact that George W. Bush and the right wing Republicans hate science almost as much as the Nazis did, let's look at the specifics of this particular political move.

The going theory is that Frist has decided to separate himself, just a little, from the party line, setting up his run for the Presidency in three years. The problem with this theory is that you don't get the Republican nomination by bucking the right wing. If Bill Frist were really planning to run for President, he'd be the most loyal guy around.

So why would he suddenly find he has a conscience?

Could Dr. Frist be lining up work for after he leaves the Senate? Is it possible that a hospital in his home state of Tennessee would get a sizable chunk of the money? Is there perhaps a highly paid consulting job opening up at that hospital some time soon?

All that can be said for certain is that this explanation makes sense.