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## Politicized Scholars Put Evolution on the Defensive

By [JODI WILGOREN](#)

SEATTLE - When President Bush plunged into the debate over the teaching of evolution this month, saying, "both sides ought to be properly taught," he seemed to be reading from the playbook of the Discovery Institute, the conservative think tank here that is at the helm of this newly volatile frontier in the nation's culture wars.

After toiling in obscurity for nearly a decade, the institute's Center for Science and Culture has emerged in recent months as the ideological and strategic backbone behind the eruption of skirmishes over science in school districts and state capitals across the country. Pushing a "teach the controversy" approach to evolution, the institute has in many ways transformed the debate into an issue of academic freedom rather than a confrontation between biology and religion.

Mainstream scientists reject the notion that any controversy over evolution even exists. But Mr. Bush embraced the institute's talking points by suggesting that alternative theories and criticism should be included in biology curriculums "so people can understand what the debate is about."

Financed by some of the same Christian conservatives who helped Mr. Bush win the White House, the organization's intellectual core is a scattered group of scholars who for nearly a decade have explored the unorthodox explanation of life's origins known as intelligent design.

Together, they have mounted a politically savvy challenge to evolution as the bedrock of modern biology, propelling a fringe academic movement onto the front pages and putting Darwin's defenders firmly on the defensive.

Like a well-tooled electoral campaign, the Discovery Institute has a carefully crafted, poll-tested message, lively Web logs - and millions of dollars from foundations run by prominent conservatives like Howard and Roberta Ahmanson, Philip F. Anschutz and Richard Mellon Scaife. The institute opened an office in Washington last fall and in January hired the same Beltway public relations firm that promoted the Contract With America in 1994.

"We are in the very initial stages of a scientific revolution," said the center's director, Stephen C. Meyer, 47, a historian and philosopher of science recruited by Discovery after he protested a professor's being punished for criticizing Darwin in class. "We want to have an effect on the dominant view of our culture."

For the institute's president, Bruce K. Chapman, a Rockefeller Republican turned Reagan conservative, intelligent design appealed to his contrarian, futuristic sensibilities - and attracted wealthy, religious philanthropists like the Ahmansons at a time when his organization was surviving on a shoestring. More student of politics than science geek, Mr. Chapman embraced the evolution controversy as the institute's signature issue precisely because of its unpopularity in the establishment.

"When someone says there's one thing you can't talk about, that's what I want to talk about," said Mr. Chapman, 64.

As much philosophical worldview as scientific hypothesis, intelligent design challenges Darwin's theory of natural selection by arguing that some organisms are too complex to be explained by evolution alone, pointing to the possibility of supernatural influences. While mutual acceptance of evolution and the existence of God appeals instinctively to a faithful public, intelligent design is shunned as heresy in mainstream universities and science societies as untestable in laboratories.

### Entering the Public Policy Sphere

From its nondescript office suites here, the institute has provided an institutional home for the dissident thinkers, pumping \$3.6 million in fellowships of \$5,000 to \$60,000 per year to 50 researchers since the science center's founding in 1996. Among the fruits are 50 books on intelligent design, many published by religious presses like InterVarsity or Crossway, and two documentaries that were broadcast briefly on public television. But even as the institute spearheads the intellectual development of intelligent design, it has staked out safer turf in the public policy sphere, urging states and school boards simply to include criticism in evolution lessons rather than actually teach intelligent design.

Since the presidential election last fall, the movement has made inroads and evolution has emerged as one of the country's fiercest cultural battlefronts, with the National Center for Science Education tracking 78 clashes in 31 states, more than twice the typical number of incidents. Discovery leaders have been at the heart of the highest-profile developments: helping a Roman Catholic cardinal place an opinion article in *The New York Times* in which he sought to distance the church from evolution; showing its film promoting design and purpose in the universe at the Smithsonian; and lobbying the Kansas Board of Education in May to require criticism of evolution.

These successes follow a path laid in a 1999 Discovery manifesto known as the Wedge Document, which sought "nothing less than the overthrow of materialism and its cultural legacies" in favor of a "broadly theistic understanding of nature."

President Bush's signature education law, known as No Child Left Behind, also helped, as mandatory testing prompted states to rewrite curriculum standards. Ohio, New Mexico and Minnesota have embraced the institute's "teach the controversy" approach; Kansas is expected to follow suit in the fall.

Detractors dismiss Discovery as a fundamentalist front and intelligent design as a clever rhetorical detour around the 1987 Supreme Court ruling banning creationism from curriculums. But the institute's approach is more nuanced, scholarly and politically adept than its Bible-based predecessors in the century-long battle over biology.

A closer look shows a multidimensional organization, financed by missionary and mainstream groups - the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provides \$1 million a year, including \$50,000 of Mr. Chapman's \$141,000 annual salary - and asserting itself on questions on issues as varied as local transportation and foreign affairs.

Many of the research fellows, employees and board members are, indeed, devout and determinedly conservative; pictures of William J. Bennett, the moral crusader and former drug czar, are fixtures on office walls, and some leaders have ties to movement mainstays like Focus on the Family. All but a few in the organization are Republicans, though these include moderates drawn by the institute's pragmatic, iconoclastic approach on nonideological topics like technology.

But even as intelligent design has helped raise Discovery's profile, the institute is starting to suffer from its success. Lately, it has tried to distance itself from lawsuits and legislation that seek to force schools to add intelligent design to curriculums, placing it in the awkward spot of trying to promote intelligent design as a robust frontier for scientists but not yet ripe for students.

The group is also fending off attacks from the left, as critics liken it to Holocaust deniers or the Taliban. Concerned about the criticism, Discovery's Cascadia project, which focuses on regional transportation and is the recipient of the large grant from the Gates Foundation, created its own Web site to ensure an individual identity.

"All ideas go through three stages - first they're ignored, then they're attacked, then they're accepted," said Jay W. Richards, a philosopher and the institute's vice president. "We're kind of beyond the ignored stage. We're somewhere in the attack."

### Origins of an Institute

Founded in 1990 as a branch of the Hudson Institute, based in Indianapolis, the institute was named for the H.M.S. Discovery, which explored Puget Sound in 1792. Mr. Chapman, a co-author of a 1966 critique of Barry M. Goldwater's anti-civil-rights campaign, "The Party That Lost Its Head," had been a liberal Republican on the Seattle City Council and candidate for governor, but moved to the right in the Reagan administration, where he served as director of the Census Bureau and worked for Edwin Meese III.

In late 1993, Mr. Chapman clipped an essay in The Wall Street Journal by Dr. Meyer, who was teaching at a Christian college in Spokane, Wash., concerning a biologist yanked from a lecture hall for discussing intelligent design. About a year later, over dinner at the Sorrento Hotel here, Dr. Meyer and George Gilder, Mr. Chapman's long-ago Harvard roommate and his writing partner, discovered parallel theories of mind over materialism in their separate studies of biology and economics.

"Bruce kind of perked up and said, 'This is what makes a think tank,' " Dr. Meyer recalled. "There was kind of an 'Aha!' moment in the conversation, there was a common metaphysic in these two ideas."

That summer of 1995, Mr. Chapman and Dr. Meyer had dinner with a representative of the Ahmansons, the banking billionaires from Orange County, Calif., who had previously given a small grant to the institute and underwritten an early conclave of intelligent design scholars. Dr. Meyer, who had grown friendly enough with the Ahmansons to tutor their young son in science, recalled being asked, "What could you do if you had some financial backing?"

So in 1996, with the promise of \$750,000 over three years from the Ahmansons and a smaller grant from the MacLellan Foundation, which supports organizations "committed to furthering the Kingdom of Christ," according to its Web site, the institute's Center for Science and Culture was born.

"Bruce is a contrarian, and this was a contrarian idea," said Edward J. Larson, the historian and author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning book on the Scopes Monkey Trial, who was an early fellow at the institute, but left in part because of its drift to the right. "The institute was living hand-to-mouth. Here was an academic, credible activity that involved funders. It interested conservatives. It brought in money."

### Support From Religious Groups

The institute would not provide details about its backers "because they get harassed," Mr. Chapman said. But a review of tax documents on [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org), a Web site that collects data on foundations, showed its grants and gifts jumped to \$4.1 million in 2003 from \$1.4 million in 1997, the most recent and oldest years available. The records show financial support from 22 foundations, at least two-thirds of them with explicitly religious missions.

There is the Henry P. and Susan C. Crowell Trust of Colorado Springs, whose Web site describes its mission as "the teaching and active extension of the doctrines of evangelical Christianity." There is also the AMDG Foundation in Virginia, run by Mark Ryland, a Microsoft executive turned Discovery vice president: the initials stand for Ad Majorem Dei Glorium, Latin for "To the greater glory of God," which Pope John Paul II etched in the corner of all his papers.

And the Stewardship Foundation, based in Tacoma, Wash., whose Web site says it was created "to contribute to the propagation of the Christian Gospel by evangelical and missionary work," gave the group more than \$1 million between 1999 and 2003.

By far the biggest backers of the intelligent design efforts are the Ahmansons, who have provided 35 percent of the science center's \$9.3 million since its inception and now underwrite a quarter of its \$1.3 million annual operations. Mr. Ahmanson also sits on Discovery's board.

The Ahmansons' founding gift was joined by \$450,000 from the MacLellan Foundation, based in Chattanooga, Tenn.

"We give for religious purposes," said Thomas H. McCallie III, its executive director. "This is not about science, and Darwin wasn't about science. Darwin was about a metaphysical view of the world."

The institute also has support from secular groups like the Verizon Foundation and the Gates Foundation, which gave \$1 million in 2000 and pledged \$9.35 million over 10 years in 2003. Greg Shaw, a grant maker at the Gates Foundation, said the money was "exclusive to the Cascadia project" on regional transportation.

But the evolution controversy has cost it the support of the Bullitt Foundation, based here, which gave \$10,000 in 2001 for transportation, as well as the John Templeton Foundation in Pennsylvania, whose Web site defines it as devoted to pursuing "new insights between theology and science."

Denis Hayes, director of the Bullitt Foundation, described Discovery in an e-mail message as "the institutional love child of Ayn Rand and Jerry Falwell," saying, "I can think of no circumstances in which the Bullitt Foundation would fund anything at Discovery today."

Charles L. Harper Jr., the senior vice president of the Templeton Foundation, said he had rejected the institute's entreaties since providing \$75,000 in 1999 for a conference in which intelligent design proponents confronted critics. "They're political - that for us is problematic," Mr. Harper said. While Discovery has "always claimed to be focused on the science," he added, "what I see is much more focused on public policy, on public persuasion, on educational advocacy and so forth."

For three years after completing graduate school in 1996, William A. Dembski could not find a university job, but he nonetheless received what he called "a standard academic salary" of \$40,000 a year.

"I was one of the early beneficiaries of Discovery largess," said Dr. Dembski, whose degrees include a doctorate in mathematics from the University of Chicago, one in philosophy from the University of Illinois and a master's of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary.

### Money for Teachers and Students

Since its founding in 1996, the science center has spent 39 percent of its \$9.3 million on research, Dr. Meyer said, underwriting books or papers, or often just paying universities to release professors from some teaching responsibilities so that they can ponder intelligent design. Over those nine years, \$792,585 financed laboratory or field research in biology, paleontology or biophysics, while \$93,828 helped graduate students in paleontology, linguistics, history and philosophy.

The 40 fellows affiliated with the science center are an eclectic group, including David Berlinski, an expatriate mathematician living in Paris who described his only religion to be "having a good time all the time," and Jonathan Wells, a member of the Unification Church, led by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who once wrote in an essay, "My prayers convinced me that I should devote my life to destroying Darwinism."

Their credentials - advanced degrees from Stanford, Columbia, Yale, the University of Texas, the University of California - are impressive, but their ideas are often ridiculed in the academic world.

"They're interested in the same things I'm interested in - no one else is," Guillermo Gonzalez, 41, an astronomer at the University of Iowa, said of his colleagues at Discovery. "What I'm doing, frankly, is frowned upon by most of my colleagues. It's not something a 'scientist' is supposed to do." Other than Dr. Berlinski, most fellows, like their financiers, are fundamentalist Christians, though they insist their work is serious science, not closet creationism.

"I believe that God created the universe," Dr. Gonzalez said. "What I don't know is whether that evidence can be tested objectively. I ask myself the tough questions."

Discovery sees the focus on its fellows and financial backers as a diversionary tactic by its opponents. "We're talking about evidence, and they want to talk about us," Dr. Meyer said.

But Philip Gold, a former fellow who left in 2002, said the institute had grown increasingly religious. "It evolved from a policy institute that had a religious focus to an organization whose primary mission is Christian conservatism," he said.

That was certainly how many people read the Wedge Document, a five-page outline of a five-year plan for the science center that originated as a fund-raising pitch but was soon posted on the Internet by critics.

"Design theory promises to reverse the stifling dominance of the materialist worldview, and to replace it with a science consonant with Christian and theistic convictions," the document says. Among its promises are seminars "to encourage and equip believers with new scientific evidence that support the faith, as well as to 'popularize' our ideas in the broader culture."

One sign of any political movement's advancement is when adherents begin to act on their own, often without the awareness of the leadership. That, according to institute officials, is what happened in 1999, when a new conservative majority on the Kansas Board of Education shocked the nation - and their potential allies here at the institute - by dropping all references to evolution from the state's science standards.

"When there are all these legitimate scientific controversies, this was silly, outlandish, counterproductive," said John G. West, associate director of the science center, who said he and his colleagues learned of that 1999 move in Kansas from newspaper accounts. "We began to think, 'Look, we're going to be stigmatized with what everyone does if we don't make our position clear.' "

Out of this developed Discovery's "teach the controversy" approach, which endorses evolution as a staple of any biology curriculum - so long as criticism of Darwin is also in the lesson plan. This satisfied Christian conservatives but also appealed to Republican moderates and, under the First Amendment banner, much of the public (71 percent in a Discovery-commissioned Zogby poll in 2001 whose results were mirrored in newspaper polls)

"They have packaged their message much more cleverly than the creation science people have," said Eugenie C. Scott, director of the National Center for Science Education, the leading defender of evolution. "They present themselves as being more mainstream. I prefer to think of that as creationism light."

A watershed moment came with the adoption in 2001 of the No Child Left Behind Act, whose legislative history includes a passage that comes straight from the institute's talking points. "Where biological evolution is taught, the curriculum should help students to understand why this subject generates so much continuing controversy," was language that Senator Rick Santorum, Republican of Pennsylvania, tried to include.

Pointing to that principle, institute fellows in 2002 played important roles in pushing the Ohio Board of Education to adopt a "teach the controversy" approach and helped devise a curriculum to support it. The following year, they successfully urged changes to textbooks in Texas to weaken the argument for evolution, and they have been consulted in numerous other cases as school districts or states consider changing their approach to biology.

But this spring, at the hearings in Kansas, Mr. Chapman grew visibly frustrated as his supposed allies began talking more and more about intelligent design.

John Calvert, the managing director of the Intelligent Design Network, based in Kansas, said the institute had the intellectual and financial resources to "lead the movement" but was "more cautious" than he would like. "They want to avoid the discussion of religion because that detracts from the focus on the science," he said.

Dr. West, who leads the science center's public policy efforts, said it did not support mandating the teaching of intelligent design because the theory was not yet developed enough and there was no appropriate curriculum. So the institute has opposed legislation in Pennsylvania and Utah that pushes intelligent design, instead urging lawmakers to follow Ohio's lead.

"A lot of people are trying to hijack the issue on both the left and the right," Dr. West said.

Dr. Chapman, for his part, sees even these rough spots as signs of success.

"All ideas that achieve a sort of uniform acceptance ultimately fall apart whether it's in the sciences or philosophy or politics after a few people keep knocking away at it," he said. "It's wise for society not to punish those people."

Jack Begg, David Bernstein and Alain Delaqu erie contributed reporting for this article.