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Atheists of Florida

DADE&BROWARD: Meetings have been held on a weekly basis at "Ye Olde Falcon Pub" in Davie, and the meeting day is usually set at the previous week's meeting. Meetings are Mondays, Tuesdays, or Wednesdays. Chapter Director Geoff Price is planning to begin regular meetings in the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale area. To receive e-mail notification of all chapter events, contact Chet Klug at Sparkz37@aol.com or Geoff at gp@rationalrevolution.net. All sign-ins at the Miami Book Fair International will be contacted either by e-mail or post card of upcoming meetings and special events. All meetings are open to the public—you need not be a member of A of F.

This is the opening invocation delivered by Michael R. Harvey of Atheists of Florida at the Thursday (July 29, 2004) morning meeting of the Tampa City Council.

The Invocation

AN INVOCATION IS AN AP-
peal for guidance from a supernatural power, but it is not only that. It is also a call, a petition, to positive action on behalf of and for a diverse citizenry. On behalf of Atheists of Florida, I would like to express our gratitude in being invited to deliver today's invocation.

Atheist Forum

Now being broadcast in two Tampa Bay counties
Pinellas County Bighthouse Cable TV
subscribers—Joe Reinhardt is now producing 30-minute pre-taped *Atheist Forum* programs broadcast on channel 96, though it is not seen in all of Pinellas County.

Saturdays.....10:30 PM
Sundays.....11:30 PM
Wednesdays....1:30 AM

Hillsborough County Cable TV subscribers:
Tuesday (live).....10:00 PM Channel 20
Rerun Saturday.....6:00 PM Channel 19

Also, watch **Backtalk with Brent**, a one-hour live call-in show by A of F president Brent Yaciw:
Thursday (live)....10:00 PM Channel 20
Rerun Friday.....11:00 PM Channel 19

CHAPTER EVENTS

TAMPA BAY: Pinellas County—First Sunday of each odd-numbered month (Jan., Mar., etc.), 1:30. Due to holidays and outreach events, no more meetings at the library for the remainder of 2004. Members will be notified of special events.

Tampa—First Sunday of each even-numbered month, 1:30-4:30, Platt Library, 3910 S. Manhattan Ave., Tampa. Dinners follow all meetings at nearby cafeterias.

FM: Ed Golly, 813/835-1500, AthAFLE@aol.com.
Big Deal! Free CD—of an atheist/Christian debate to all first-time attendees of any Tampa Bay chapter meeting.

We are committed to the separation of state and church as defined by the United States Constitution. It is the core value of that remarkable and visionary document to protect the human-derived rights of all people in the continuous struggle for equal opportunities to pursue a safe and decent quality of life.

When an invocation takes on the form of public prayer, it is also a violation of the very principles upon which our country and Constitution were founded. Although we are dismayed that the practice of public prayer by governing bodies charged with representing all citizens still continues in violation of the Constitution, we also recognize that this practice has become deeply embedded in the national psyche.

Elected and appointed leaders who wish to seek the guidance of a deity can do so in private, as is their right. But not in the public arena where the establishment of religion is an assured end-result.

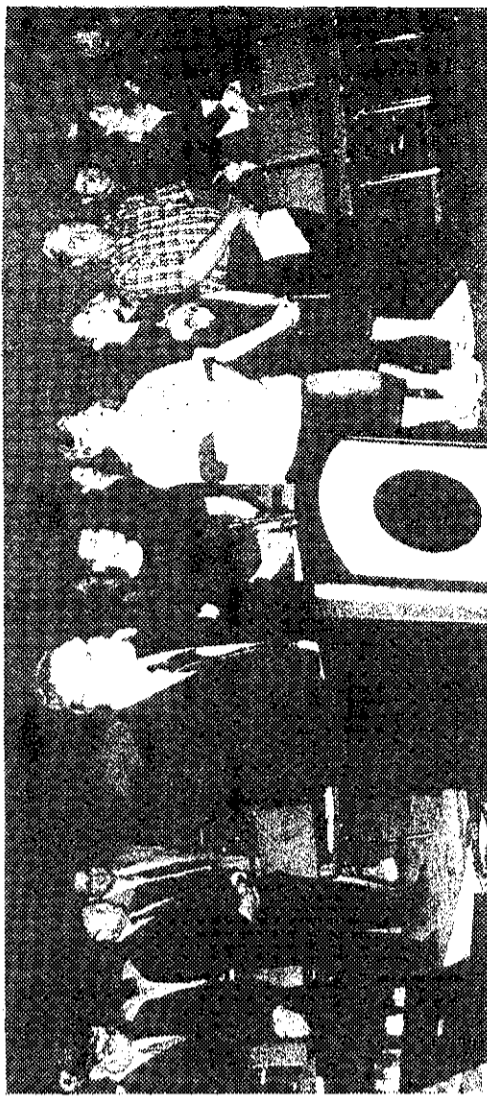
History—that ever-unfolding, ever-flourishing story of human civilization—teaches us that the rights and accomplishments of humanity are the results of its past struggles, and that the road less traveled is many times the highest path to human progress. We therefore invoke this council and all of our leaders to be guided and inspired by the invaluable lessons of history, the honest insights of science, the guileless wisdom of logic, and the heart and soul of our shared humanity – compassion and tolerance.

So rather than clasping your hands, bowing your heads and closing your eyes, open your arms to that which truly makes us strong - our diversity. Raise your heads and open your eyes to recognize and fully understand the problems before you and know that ultimately, solutions to human problems can come only from human beings.

Thank you.



We Invoke!



Atheists of Florida member Michael Harvey offers the invocation before the Tampa City Council July 29th, 2004

—by *Michael Harvey*

TAMPA—THE INSTITUTION OF RELIGION once again proved its capacity to incite bigotry, hatred, intolerance, and general ugliness when a member of Atheists of Florida appeared before the Tampa City Council to give the opening invocation.

Prologue

Earlier this year, just before spring, Ed Golly ran into Tampa City Councilman John Dingfelder in South Tampa, where both of them reside. A conversation ensued in which Dingfelder complimented Golly on our local cable access show *The Atheist Forum*, and indicated that he thought the show was 'interesting.' It suddenly occurred to Dingfelder that it would be a good idea to have an atheist deliver an invocation to the Tampa City Council some time in July (when it was again his turn in rotation to select the invokers for six city council meetings). Dingfelder allowed that he felt 'everyone should have a chance.' Interestingly, Dingfelder is Jewish and regularly attends a Synagogue. And so it began...

Timeline

- E-mails were sent to A of F members; the possibility of delivering an invocation was mentioned.
- June A of F meeting—the subject of delivering an invocation was discussed; we agreed to do it. Nan Owens produced a copy of another invocation given a few months prior by humanist Herb Silverman, to a Council meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, in which 7 of the 9 council mem-

bers walked out. We formed a committee to work on the text. Golly then asked for volunteers to deliver the invocation, he looked over at me and asked if I would be comfortable delivering the invocation; I agreed.

- A lengthy and heated e-mail debate ensued as to what the invocation text should be. I composed the text that became paragraphs 1, 3, and 4 of the invocation with input from Golly and Bobbie Kirkhart, president of the Atheist Alliance International.

NOTE: I was not given ANY guidelines beforehand for delivering an invocation. Dingfelder only hoped that our invocation would "be respectful." Nothing was said prior to that day about [not] being political.

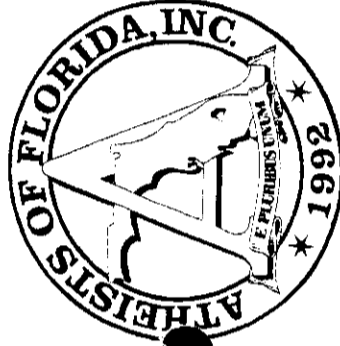
- First week of July—Golly mentioned to a friend of his—Michelle Bearden, Religion writer/editor for the *Tampa Tribune*, that we were going to deliver the invocation and SHE determined it was a newsworthy item. She spoke with her editor and the newspaper put reporter Andy Reid on the story who contacted both Golly and me for the scoop. He also contacted the City Council for comments. Mary Alvarez (one of the council members who walked out) said that she was interested in what an atheist invocation would be like. She was also quoted as saying, "Who's he going to pray to?";

continued on Page 4

invocation: 1 a: the act or process of petitioning for help or support; b: a calling upon for authority or justification.—Webster's Ninth

New Collegiate Dictionary

Atheists of Florida
Dedicated to the absolute separation of State and church
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SCIENCE IS A WONDERFUL THING! New and amazing information and technologies are continually being discovered. This information and technology is the result of past information and technology. Scientists and engineers work in their present time, based on the past time.

We in our present day look at the past

THE SOLUTION IS EVOLUTION
NO. 28—Early Evolutionists

—Jim Strayer



and sometimes refer to mistakes of earlier scientists. We should understand that mistakes are not usually the case. It is the lack of information or technology in their time that lets us correct them in our time.

Even the great physical scientists had it wrong once in a while. Isaac Newton (1642-1724) believed that God nudged the planets from time to time to keep them in proper orbit. Augustime-Jean Fresnel (1788-1827), an obscure physicist, showed that Newton was wrong about light passing through glass and revolutionized the lighthouses of the world. Today we recognize Newton for what he did and forget about the rest. I believe that is as it should be.

A hundred years before Darwin, George Buffon (1702-1778), described everything known about the natural world, wrestled with the similarities of humans and apes and even talked about common ancestry of man and apes. Although Buffon believed in organic change, he could not provide a coherent mechanism for such changes. He thought that the environment acted directly on organisms through what he called "organic particles." Buffon obviously does not receive enough credit and it is because he lacked a mechanism to explain his belief. Louis Pasteur was wrong about many things concerning bacteria and virus, but he was right about the things that were important. What made him famous was that he could show a mechanism to explain disease. We can trust the physical laws of nature, but

Strayer's series The Solution is Evolution will continue in the next newsletter. Strayer is a retired biology teacher living with his wife, Bobbe, in Ormond-By-The-Sea. E-mail: BJOJIMS@aol.com.

it is the biological sciences that must deal with ever-changing DNA and other biological molecules. It is because of these changes, evolution, that we are all here, but sometimes scientists wish that biological process were just a little more stable. It is because of this that I believe we must "cut a little slack" for the early evolutionists. Jean Baptiste de Lamarck's (1744-1829) ideas appear in most biology text books explaining that he believed that acquired characteristics could be passed from generation to generation. What they leave out is that he thought man was in the middle of a direct evolutionary line (the Great Chain of Being). Simple plants were at the bottom and God was at the top. Between man and God were angels. His theory on acquired characteristics proved to be wrong, but it was the main theory until Charles Darwin (1809-1882) wrote *On the Origin of Species*. The same text books usually have a section telling that Alfred Wallace proposed the theory of evolution at the same time as Darwin. They both had their work published in 1858, in joint papers in the journal of the Linnaean Society. What most texts don't print is that Wallace never understood evolution completely. When insects and lower animals were involved he said evolution took place, but when it came to the human brain, it did not. He was a Spiritualist and believed the human brain was too complicated and magnificent to have evolved. He thought there must be a supernatural power. Darwin wrote him several letters about this, but was unable to change his mind. That is sad because it detracts from Wallace's contribution to the study of evolution.

Darwin accepted some of Lamarck's theory about acquired characteristics and he also believed that there was a blending of characteristics of parents passed on to their offspring. He apparently knew nothing of Gregor Mendel's (1822-1884) work in heredity, and of course he knew nothing about DNA. That was to come years later. Darwin's critics, both religious and scientific, had every reason to challenge the theory by asking how it happened: what was the mechanism? Had Darwin known what was to be discovered years later, he could have answered all criticism of the theory. But alas, that is not the way science works. Scientists and engineers will improve on technology and new and more startling information will be added to the vast amount we have accumulated to date. Hopefully we can shed the superstitions that hold us back, but science will always have its critics. They are a necessary part of scientific research.

Atheists and freethinkers weighed in on the invocation. Dear Atheists of Florida, Congratulations to Michael Harvey for breaking what seems to be an awful tradition in US council meetings for religious invocations. All the best, —Frank Jordans Editor, New Humanist magazine www.newhumanist.org.uk Received on the back of a post card of Red Square



"A black man tells an atheist he should know his 'place,' a choice of phrase that recalls similar statements directed at blacks by bigots past and present."

TEMPLE TERRACE, FL—Dear Mr. Harvey: We have read your "sermon" to the City Council and find it in many ways comparable to the dialectic dialogations of the "witnesses" appearing on Ch. 22. Forsooth, may our "diversity" you seem to evoke lead to a presidential ticket of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell! Best wishes always! —Laddie

Please keep and protect Robyn Blummer

Dear Philip Galley, Many of Robyn's entries have been called to my attention for several years. The neo-Cons and the Religious Right have no doubt hated her before, now they will be afraid of her, which means they will want to destroy her as a writer. They fear Gays. I am an atheist who has kept abreast of the fundamentalist minority reaction to out of the closet atheists for fifteen years. They use their worst words and vilest remarks when referring to atheists. So what, I can't be excommunicated or banished from heaven or scared by their blown up Satan ghost. What I do have to contemplate is that the Neo-Cons need me and other unpopular Americans to raise up action among otherwise lethargic voters. Millions of Dollars have been raised for religious or pseudo-religious politicians with warnings about minorities taking over the nation and destroying families. Consider the big deal about gay marriage threatening the family as an institution. This is a hoax and a complete distraction from real political issues today. Straight people will marry the opposite sex, just you watch, and children will result. Mr. Gailey, the *St. Petersburg Times* will be threatened just like Disney and Clear Channel radio. Your fairness will be questioned more than ever and you will be branded with the hottest irons the literal believers can label your publication with. Well is this new? I only ask that your people don't decide to drop a smart and talented journalist because of majority religion's vexing. You may quote me, Sincerely, —John C. Miller, Lehigh Acres, FL

We welcome correspondence from readers. Address mail to: Atheists of Florida P.O. Box 130753 Tampa, FL 33681 Or e-mail: ATHALFLE@aol.com

Finally got it right

Thank you a million times for not only saying what needs to be said, eloquently and out from the closet, but also for providing a nice counterpoint to what we long-time readers of

the *St. Pete Times* have regarded as an ever-increasing tendency to cater to the religious right.

We atheists, accustomed even as we are to vituperation, were appalled at the intolérant reactions of White and the two ladies, especially Alvarez, remark that she wasn't going to 'sit there and be told what to believe.' Apparently it's okay for us to sit by, day after day, in meetings, theatres, sports events... everywhere we turn, and have religion of one kind or another, usually only thinly veiled, rammed down our throats. As for White's remark about unprotected sex, that may just be the all-time low in ignorant responses to our 'threat.' As for the *Times*, not a day goes by, it seems, that the Floridian section doesn't wear on its face some fatuous piece about a gospel singer, a minister, a church, a touchy-feely-heart-warmer about how someone's faith saved his life. The *Times* keeps this up and it'll turn into one of those small-town rags that reports on weddings, funerals, covered dish suppers and lost dogs... this is, or was, far too good a paper to be catering so blatantly to the Bible-waving masses. —Judy Ellis, Saint Petersburg

The following letter was mailed, on A of F letterhead, to John Dingfelder, along with an additional page with 29 more support signatures. A similar letter was mailed to Linda Saul-Sena, thanking her for voicing her support July 29th. Dear Councilman Dingfelder:

As the organization president, I would like to personally thank you for your commitment to fairness and inclusiveness, which is obviously an unpopular stance. Though the public reaction came as no surprise to us (and now you have a taste of what we live with every day), I can tell it's taken even more courage than you imagined.

Thursday was a day filled with ironies. Our organization's opposition to invocations was justified by those who insisted on reading the word narrowly as synonymous with prayer—and who are apparently unaware that defining an invocation as a prayer makes the constitutional violation ever more obvious. A black man tells an atheist he should know his "place," a choice of phrase that recalls similar statements directed at blacks by bigots past and present. A lesbian promotes the religion which condemns her solely on the basis of her sexual orientation, pandering to those who would cheerfully burn her at the stake. A significant percentage of the council members talked about fairness and equal treatment—except that some (those representing religions) should be more equal than others—and seemed unaware of the Orwellian parallel.

The reaction since then has done even more to bolster our case that the invocation practice is discriminatory and divisive. As you undoubtedly know, one woman likened Michael to a thief or rapist, and our organization received death threats. Religion, it seems, is the last refuge of the bigot.

Yes, it's been an entertaining week, and we fervently hope there are many more of the same. Once again, I thank you both as an individual and speaking for the organization, for the opportunity. Sincerely, —Brent Yaciv

President, Atheists of Florida, Inc. The individuals below have signed to express their support for your action in promoting equal treatment for all: [29 people signed at Sunday's A of F meeting]

"It is entirely unclear that praying at the beginning of a local government meeting does any good in the first place. If God were truly answering these ritualistic government prayers for wisdom, there would be a lot fewer strip malls in the world."

The government takes our money by the force of law. We do not have a choice about paying taxes to the government. With this tax money taken from all citizens, the government builds City Hall.

More columnists opine

This is the building, then, where we are going to begin taxpayer meetings by praying according to one religion or another?

I cannot see how anybody would think this is a fair thing to do. Whenever the government is praying in a public building, some of the taxpayers are going to get left out.

If the City Council really feels the need to have

More Quotes

"You never know. John Dingfelder might show up with his atheists and want to sit in your church and pray to no one if you call it a public purpose or public property."

—Hillsborough Commissioner Ronda Storms during debate among commissioners about whether to put a small portion of Bowers Simmons Neighborhood Park in Progress Village up for bid. When St. James AME Church wanted it for expansion.

"Public prayer provides no wisdom, but it does divide."
—St. Petersburg Times columnist Howard Troxler

"We have never had people of an atheist group represent Americans, and I don't think it is appropriate in this setting. Listening to an atheist only one time could create a snowball effect on government. Merely hearing what a nonbeliever might say is akin to having unprotected sex."

—Tampa City Council member Kevin White just after walking out of the council meeting when Harvey gave the invocation.

"I certainly don't agree with having an atheist come for the invocation. I think the invocation is a time for the council to start their day with an expression of faith."

—City of Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio

"Yeah, this is Ed Golly, the atheist...take note. You're a c*#% sucker. You people need to f#*@ing take note that there is on the US dollar "In God We Trust." If you don't like the f#*@ing fact that people pray or that there's prayer in school, GO F#*@ YOURSELF, A**@#+\$! I'm so tired of f#*@ing a**@#+\$ like you. You need to be exterminated. You people suck!"

—Anonymous telephone voice mail.

"City Hall belongs to everybody—everybody—regardless of what they believe in or what they don't believe in. Because that's what our nation was built on. And that is what our soldiers overseas are fighting for."

—Tampa City Council member John Dingfelder.

some kind of ritual before it gets down to the pothole-fixing part of the meeting, then it should have a ritual open to everybody and members should sit there and smile politely.

The other solution would be to stick to the secular stuff at City Hall that everybody pays for, and let everyone pray or not pray on his or her own time. That is a profoundly conservative idea. It'll never fly."

Daniel Ruth Tampa Tribune

Judging from all the genuflecting, breast-beating and harrumphing on a biblical scale, you would have thought Councilman John Dingfelder, D-Locusts, had invited Satan to deliver the weekly homily before everyone gets down to the serious work of buck-passing, proclamation heralding and sucking up to the mayor.

Harvey's remarks were hardly something out of 'Beelzebub Does The Big Guava.'

It's a good thing Alvarez fled when she did. There was no telling how soon the councilwoman might have started contributing to the United Way after being exposed to Harvey's faithless diatribe.

Pray tell, Councilman White, dies listening to an avowed atheist's call for compassion and tolerance rise to the level of unprotected sex while inspiring legions of civil service employees to forsake their faith and become goddess heathens?

For his part, Dingfelder, D-Boils, said the response to his invitation to an atheist to deliver the invocation was running about 50-50, presumably between those who supported Dingfelder's sense of equal time and those who believe he is in league with Lucifer.

Still, it will probably be a cold day in hell before another atheist is given the podium to spew the hateful venom of compassion and tolerance—thank God."

Robyn Blumner St. Petersburg Times

"In writing of my objection to the open ridicule and discrimination faced by atheists, I had anticipated letters maligning me and warning of the eternal damnation to come. And yes, there were a handful of those. But they were countered by more than 350 positive responses. My e-mail account overflowed with people expressing their amazement that someone, somewhere was finally saying what they held to be true—views that were almost completely absent in the mainstream media.

I was wished *bon courage* by many readers who expected I'd have to hold up against an onslaught of negativism; and the newspaper was roundly congratulated just for being bold enough to allow my heresies into print. But it is they who deserve congratulations for courage."

And it's not over yet....
As the dust was settling, we received an e-mail from Ron Motta, a researcher for *Playboy* Magazine. The journal takes strong positions on state/church separation and it seems the invocation caught their eye. Motta received a full transcript of the invocation and responded that *Playboy* will publish the story in the Playboy Forum section of the upcoming January issue. For once we may look at more than just the pictures. **A**

I'm an atheist—so what?

—Robyn E. Blumner

WHAT IS IT," ASKED GERMAN philosopher Friedrich Neitzsche, "is man only a blunder of God, or God only a blunder of man?"

I vote for the latter.

Though I was brought up in a religious faith, it was at a very young age—preteen—that I realized I had no belief in God and no amount of indoctrination was going to change that. This sense of nonbelief has been so strong and abiding throughout my life that I find it virtually impossible to understand the psyches of people who believe in anything supernatural.

Just to be clear, it is not just God that I can't fathom. I also reject the existence of Satan or any form of afterlife beyond the redistribution of the body's matter. In my book there are no ghosts, golems, angels or spirits. I do not believe in psychic power, astrology or predestination—and forget about karma, kismet or crystals. My view is that the "soul" does not exist outside a functioning brain, nothing was "meant to be," and things that seem inexplicable are not miracles or paranormal experiences, they are simply not yet explained.

I have never understood why the fallback position to unanswerable questions about the universe is that an all-powerful, all-knowing being intervened. To me, "we don't know yet" is a fine response.

I don't expect to be applauded for these views since they are out of step with the majority of Americans, but neither should I be despised for

Columnist Robyn E. Blumner is former director of the Florida ACLU. Her column appears every Sunday in the Perspective section of the Saint Petersburg Times.

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them. Yet, I will be. I can already imagine the torrent of hate mail, with readers accusing me of all sorts of vile human derangements just because I subscribe to reason and logic to explain the world rather than faith.

As an atheist I am a member of the last minority group that is still subject to open and acceptable derision and discrimination.

The depths of this hostility was on display at a Tampa City Council meeting recently when three council members walked out rather than be present when an atheist gave the invocation. Kevin White, an African-American on the council, first tried to get the invocation canceled. When that failed he and the two Hispanic members of the council left the room.

They showed a shocking lack of tolerance for diversity and difference, considering they too are members of historically excluded groups.

White went on to suggest that it was demonstrably dangerous to hear an atheist speak. He said it could unleash a "snowball effect" on government and compared it to engaging in unprotected sex.

Huh? Does he mean that appealing to the rational mind rather than a supreme being is so inherently persuasive that it could catch on?

Well, it has. What White may not know is that a far larger percentage of his constituency are already nonbelievers than he suspects. A 2001 survey conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York found that more than 29-million adult Americans say they identify with no religion. Of those, more than 6-million said they didn't believe in God. Compare that to the number of adult Americans who say they are Jewish (2.8-million), Muslim (1.1-million), Unitarian (600,000) or Buddhist (1.1-million).

If national statistics equate even in broad terms to Tampa, then inviting Unitarian and Muslim speakers to give the inspirational words to begin the council meeting represents the views of many fewer residents than inviting atheists to do so. (Of course prayers don't belong at government functions regardless of who is giving them, but that's another column.)

White doesn't know about the mainstreaming of atheism because atheists don't tend to stand up for

themselves. They have been relegated to a closet that is darker and deeper than that in which gays and lesbians find themselves. Certainly in the public sphere, announcing one's atheism is the kiss of political death. According to a 1999 Gallup Poll, half of Americans say they would refuse to vote for an atheist candidate solely on that basis.

During this year's oral arguments in the U.S. Supreme Court case challenging the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, atheist dad and attorney Michael Newdow got into a telling exchange with Chief Justice William Rehnquist. When Newdow suggested that having a religious phrase in the pledge is divisive, pointing to the uproar the case had caused throughout the country, Rehnquist had him admit that Congress unanimously agreed to add the words "under God" in 1954. "That doesn't sound divisive," said Rehnquist. To which Newdow replied, "That's only because no atheist can get elected to public office."

The courtroom gallery broke into spontaneous applause at this clever, apt rejoinder.

Today, there are still eight states that have provisions in their state constitutions explicitly barring atheists from holding political office. The Tennessee Constitution states: "No person who denies the being of God, or a future state of rewards and punishments, shall hold any office in the civil department of this state."

These restrictions are no longer enforceable, but the language remains on the books. No legislator is interested in suggesting their removal.

America is a country steeped in religion and as such I expect to be bombarded by it. I take no issue with the right of religious people to proselytize, to erect houses of worship on every corner or to broadcast their fervor on television and radio. All I ask in return is a little consideration for the millions of us who don't join in the "good news."

My faith is in mankind and the marvels accomplished by human ingenuity and drive. Why that makes me a pariah to White and others like him is beyond my ken. It certainly says more about them than me. **A**

and, "It's a free country, whatever floats your boat." The story was written, published on July 15th, then went out on the AP wire. Within one week, it was picked up by every major newspaper in Florida, and several local TV and radio stations in Florida and throughout the Southeast and Southwest.

□ Shortly thereafter, writer Larry Thornberry, contacted Golly and me because he had been hired to write a piece for *American Spectator*. I told him that I WOULD NOT use the opportunity to bash religion in any way, and that I was going to invoke the council to be guided by reason, logic, science, and the lessons of history. I also explained to him that an invocation has several meanings, some of which are not an appeal to the supernatural.

"I could not listen to someone who does not believe in a supreme being."
—Tampa City Councilwoman
Rose Ferlita

□ About 4 days before July 29th, Brent Yaciv, President of A of F, e-mailed to me a proposed revision that incorporated my text with a paragraph he wrote, which became the now infamous paragraph #2. In no small way did I agonize over whether or not to include this language. I realized that it would be WRONG not to include it. Why? First—it needed to be said; second—I knew that it mattered not what I would/would not say; many people were going to "demonize" atheists in general and me in particular regardless of how "respectful" I appeared or sounded. So, I revised the text to include Yaciv's suggestions.

□ July 29th—I showed up at the Tampa Convention Center where the council was temporarily meeting while renovations were underway at City Hall. Some of my fellow atheists were there along with the local media. Upon entering the meeting hall, I was swarmed by the media and interviewed before the invocation for about 5 minutes.

□ The moment the meeting was brought to order and I was introduced to give the invocation, councilman Kevin White interrupted the proceedings and stressed how inappropriate it was for an atheist to speak during what had traditionally been 'a hallowed moment.' White also said that he had heard on the news the previous day that I was going to make a political statement. White made a motion to not allow me to give the invocation or to just skip it for that day. Councilwoman Mary Alvarez seconded White's motion and a heated debate ensued among the council members. Council members Dingfelder and Linda Saul-Sena defended my right to give the invocation. Alvarez spoke again and stressed that she could not "listen to someone who did not believe in a supreme being." Councilwoman Rose Ferlita weighed in against me but did not vote in favor of White's motion.

Dingfelder, who had anticipated the controversy and prepared his remarks in advance defending his action, called on the city's legal representative for an opinion on the motion. The counselor reviewed

the city bylaws to determine that the motion must pass by a unanimous vote or it could not be passed.

Alvarez then spoke once again to say that, "I don't have to sit here and listen to an atheist tell me what I should or should not believe." She then removed her lapel mic, slammed it down on the table, and rose to leave the room. Chairman Pro-Tem Shawn Harrison called for a vote on the motion and on a 3-3 tie it failed. Dingfelder announced the invocation would continue; Alvarez, White, and Ferlita left the dais before I even walked to the podium.

□ As I walked to the podium, Harrison 'reminded me' to not make a political statement. I found his admonition both confusing and amusing, since I had neither met nor heard from him until that moment. I began the invocation. After the second paragraph,

To read the entire unedited invocation given by Michael Harvey, turn to page 8.

Harrison banged his gavel and told me I was out of order admonishing that I was making a political statement. I looked at him and said, "I'd say what occurred before I began was much more political in nature." He glared, then told me to continue giving the invocation that he told me to give. I finished speaking the invocation as it was written.

□ During the invocation, I looked up and made eye contact with each of the three council members who remained on the dais. Dingfelder looked embarrassed, Saul-Sena was beaming! Harrison was still glowering at me. After I finished, Harrison again remarked that my invocation was inappropriate, Dingfelder said the last two paragraphs were more what he had in mind, and Saul-Sena was just smiling at me.

□ I left the podium. My fellow atheists and I proceeded to once again face the media outside of council chambers. We were interviewed for about 15 minutes by the local media and Fox News which had sent a crew from Miami.

□ Stories appeared on TV for a few days thereafter and Fox News ran it's piece nationally the following weekend.

□ Three follow-up stories appeared in the both *The Tampa Tribune* and *The Saint Petersburg Times* (see page 3).

□ White was quoted in *The Saint Petersburg Times* as saying, "Even listening to an atheist just once could unleash a snowball effect on government" and likened it to having 'unprotected sex.'

□ The following Thursday, a Christian minister gave the invocation and mentioned the proper name of a deity—"Jesus," thereby violating one of few documented guidelines for giving invocations. White was quoted as saying, "We're back to status quo!" Saul-Sena remarked, "Here we go again."

□ The Thursday after that, yet another Christian minister mentioned the proper name "Jesus."

□ Neither of those two ministers were gavelled to an out-of-order status.

□ Delicious irony: Two Hispanic women (Alvarez, Ferlita) and an African-American male (Kevin White) tried to deny me the right to participate in what has become a symbolic part of the political process, based solely on my association with just another type of minority.

Why did we do it?

□ To make people aware of the fact that an invocation can be something other than a prayer; once this concept is grasped and accepted, the idea of an atheist giving an invocation doesn't seem so radical.

□ In lieu of ceasing what is a bigoted, exclusionary, unconstitutional custom, we would like for a greater diversity of people (secularists and religionists of all faiths) to be able to deliver invocations. Tradition, habit, and custom, do not justify the status quo nor anything else for that matter.

□ To encourage people to no longer be afraid to openly admit they're a non-believer or that they harbor doubts. I'd like to see some politicians come clean and publicly espouse their non-belief. I've always thought that there are more people in the closet and on the fence than we realize or that religious fundamentalists would like to admit.

Epilogue

□ Support for the invocation has been very positive, even from theists. Many people at work, most of whom are Christians, congratulated me and said they felt I was not only standing up for atheists but for everyone. One girl in particular, told me she tried to call into her favorite Christian radio station to let them know "...you don't know Michael, he's not the person you're making him out to be; he cares more about people than most Christians I know."

□ As a direct consequence of the controversy generated by the invocation, *Saint Petersburg Times* editor columnist Robyn Blumner wrote a piece on August 8th entitled "I'm an atheist—so what?" (see page 3) in which she came out of the closet, espoused her world view, and denounced the behavior of the Tampa City Council. The following week, she wrote a follow-up column because the support for her first column was so overwhelmingly positive.

□ An elderly man looked up every Michael Harvey in the Tampa phone book and called each number. He eventually reached me on August 7th. He and his wife were so taken by the invocation that he would like for me to write a secular eulogy/memorial service for them.

□ Three people at my workplace have since come out of their closets and openly espoused their atheism. Thursday, July 29th, 2004, was a good day.

National Academy of Science survey

National Academy of Science is goddess to the core

THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCE (USA) has recently produced a guidebook for public school teachers, *Teaching about Evolution and the Nature of Science*. This book tries to assure readers that neither the NAS nor evolution are anti-Christian.

But a recent survey published in the leading science journal *Nature* conclusively showed that the National Academy of Science is anti-God to the core: A survey of all 517 NAS members in biological and physical sciences resulted in just over half responding. Results: 72.2 % were overtly atheistic, 20.8 % agnostic, and only 7.0 % believed in a personal God. Belief in God and immortality was lowest among biologists. It is likely that those who didn't respond were unbelievers as well, so the study probably underestimates the level of anti-God belief in the NAS. The unbelief is far higher than the percentage among scientists in general, or in the whole population.

Commenting on the professed religious neutrality of Teaching about Evolution E, the surveyors comment:

"NAS President Bruce Alberts said: "There are very many outstanding members of this academy who are very religious people, people who believe in evolution, many of them biologists." Our research suggests otherwise."

Source: E.J. Larson and L. Witham, 'Leading scientists still reject God', *Nature* 394 (6691):313, 23 July 1998. The sole criterion for being classified as a 'leading' or 'greater' scientist was membership of the NAS.

* * *

Footnote: Ironically, one of the greatest physicists and 1968 Nobel Laureate (Physics) was Luis W. Alvarez.

I tried to determine if he was an avowed atheist such as Richard Feynman, J. Chadwick, M. Gell-Mann, S. Weinberg and many more who have openly declared their atheism.

I am quite confident that Louis W. Alvarez was also an atheist. His son, Walter Alvarez, is a professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

I wonder what Mary Alvarez, Kevin White, and Rose Ferlita would do if an atheist Nobel Laureate was invited to give an invocation.

Please convey my congratulations to Michael R. Harvey and all the members of your chapter for this historic event.

—Christos

Christos Tzanetakos is founder of Atheists of Florida.

Brag tag

This is a picture of an actual label from a piece of luggage made by a small American company, primarily for overseas customers.

Here is the translation of the French:

- Wash with warm water.
- Use mild soap.
- Dry flat.
- Do not use bleach.
- Do not dry in the dryer.
- Do not iron.
- We are sorry that our President is an idiot.
- We did not vote for him.

