

Searching for God

Kenneth Silber's ("Is God in the Details?," July) article is a lucid overview of the current state of a somewhat silly debate: Can science prove the existence of God?

However, Silber fails to mention the most important point. Even if God were discovered in the details, it in no way supports conservative (or liberal) religious beliefs and opinions. Proof of an original watchmaker does nothing to tell us the correct time of day. Perhaps that is why everyone involved in this issue refers to the generic "religion" rather than particular church laws and theologies.

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I appreciate that Silber debunked the "Science Finds God" argument without resorting to the typical mockery of faith and religion in general. If the other discussants conducted themselves this way, it would be a more interesting—and perhaps more productive—discussion.

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Kenneth Silber rightly notes the Christian parallels in relativistic cosmology, a sudden creation from nothing that peters out into a nihilistic nothingness. One parallel that Silber does not touch is that of blasphemy or heresy. A minority of astronomers and physicists are challenging the Big Bang dogma. If the universe is truly infinite (and no observation has disproven this), then all possible configurations must eventually occur. In fact, those configurations must occur an infinite number of times.

The majority view has the advantage that the major media do not report the dissident views of current observational evidence. It is simply a myth that the Big Bang theory is the only model possible. How can one speak intelligently of anthropic principles or the fine-tuning of constants if one cannot speak authoritatively of what is going on inside the sun? Modern physicists are now inventing dark matter, superstrings, and bubble universe theories in endless tiers of unproven hypotheses which they treat as fact. It is always easier to philosophize about something than to go to the telescope and prove it. Perhaps we should leave God out of the discussion until we have learned how to walk.

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As a trained physicist, I would like to offer an alternative explanation for the alleged "fine-tuning" of the universe described by Kenneth Silber. Supposedly the "omega" of the early universe had to be correct to within one quadrillionth of 1 percent for the Big Bang to produce the present universe.

Consider an analogy: Suppose you found a ball resting on a narrow ledge high up on a building. You do a calculation and find that someone would have to throw it exactly right or it would never stay on the ledge. Throw it too hard and it would bounce off the ledge; too soft and it wouldn't make it to the ledge. The probability that someone might throw it exactly

right is one in a quadrillion. What would you conclude?

Obviously, somebody opened the window. The ball didn't get there because someone threw it, it got there because someone opened the window and placed it there.

The Big Bang didn't happen. That isn't how the present state of the universe came to be. The very idea is self-contradictory to begin with; but the determination that there was only one chance in 100 quadrillion that a Big Bang could result this way is scientific proof that this isn't what happened—proof as good as any scientific proof can be. Modern physics isn't becoming more "anthropic," it is becoming more irrational.

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I often ask myself what the likes of Robert Bork, or any other theist who understands rudimentary economics, would say if someone said, "Look, modern industrial economies *must* be the result of a divine plan, for the odds of that many production and distribution tasks being done in such a complex yet coordinated fashion are too small to believe that the arrangement of these tasks is not the result of conscious design."

It's easy to show that, starting from pre-industrial conditions, the chance that modern, highly specialized, and well-fed cities such as Manhattan or Los Angeles

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(or even, say, Plains, Georgia.) would emerge is inconceivably small. And yet, modern Manhattan, Los Angeles, and Plains function daily with a deep division of labor and successful coordination. No serious economist—or syndicated columnist—has ever argued that the complexity of modern industrial society is “theologically suggestive.” To make this argument would be to reveal a complete lack of understanding of Adam Smith’s insight that economic coordination is (to borrow a phrase from Adam Ferguson) “the result of human action but not of human design.” I’m continually astonished at the capacity of intelligent people to embrace baseless, and often comically wrong, arguments.

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Wouldn’t any universe, whether or not it contained life, be so complex that its existence would be statistically improbable? Why then would we expect our universe to be any different? We seem to have no difficulty attributing a lottery win to sheer chance even though the odds against it are enormous. Why must we look for some other explanation for the universe just because the odds against its existence are higher?

I think if someone were to research the history of religion’s fractious relationship with science he or she would discover a certain trend: When science discovers some principle that conflicts with prevailing dogma, religion initially responds by either denying the evidence (e.g., evolution or the possibility of multiple universes) or suppressing it (think of Copernicus or current Islamic theocracies). If those approaches fail, religion simply reinvents itself and finds a way to fit the scientific fact or theory in question into its new scheme of thinking. And so biblical “days” come to mean “billions of years” to incorporate the hard evidence about the age of the universe and evolution and so on. The “anthropic principle” seems to be another such move on the part of religionists.

In any case, this constant fuss over the secular and physical worlds on the part of religion is highly suspect. It reeks of a very

human desire to direct and control the thinking and actions of others. And that is clearly not the core purpose of any major world religion. Virtually all religions are geared toward achieving a state that transcends the physical and secular world and all of its various laws, natural and otherwise. Science cannot prove or disprove the existence of such a transcendent state any more than it can prove or disprove the existence of a Supreme Being who may or may not have created it.

It is highly unlikely that God will ever be found in the details. I sincerely doubt that we will be able to sneak up on God and prove His existence by turning over rocks—regardless of how big and impressive they are. If God exists, then He is surely beyond such petty, physical concerns.

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Kenneth Silber replies: I appreciate the time and effort of the large number of readers who wrote to REASON, or to me personally, in response to my article. But contrary to Jeremy Dunn, it is incorrect to say that I “rightly [noted] the Christian parallels in relativistic cosmology, a sudden creation from nothing that peters out into a nihilistic nothingness.” I noted no such “parallels” and do not find them compelling. Also, readers of Lewis E. Little’s letter may be misled into thinking that it’s my view that omega (the curvature of space) had to be extremely “fine-tuned” for the Big Bang to produce a viable universe; that’s actually a view that I sought to refute.

Public School Scars

One would think that at 72 years of age and after seven children, 13 grandchildren, and one great-grandchild, the wounds would be healed. Not so. Nick Gillespie’s editorial (“Schools of Alienation,” July) chafed my high school scars until they bled.

I attended a public school of 400 in a Midwestern town of 35,000. As I was neither heavy enough nor quick enough for contact sports, my interests centered around fishing, hunting, golf, choir,

drama, and reading. My appearance, use of “50-cent” words, and popularity with the coeds made me a marked man with the jocks and muscle set. But I refused to look down.

As a result they beat me regularly. They slammed my face into a cast-iron radiator, breaking my teeth; they held me down on Main Street and cut off my hair; they cuffed my ear hard enough to break the eardrum; and, of course, they threw me into lockers. Fighting back only increased the severity of the attacks.

All this occurred during a time when millions were fighting a world war (in which I would soon take part) to prove that might does not make right. The school did nothing. My parents did nothing. I did nothing. I wanted to kill them all. I had the guns and the know-how. Fortunately I did not have the courage or insanity or whatever to use them. Besides, I figured God would disapprove.

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Thanks for your articles on the factors behind the Littleton shootings. Mr. Gillespie’s resonated deeply with me as a reminder of years of frequent harassment, occasional serious threats, and my vengeful thoughts. Mr. Hazlett (“Hostage Rescue,” July) clarified why these conditions are so much more explosive in schools than, say, in the workplace: There’s no escape.

If anyone at work treated me the way many of my classmates treated me—to say nothing of how they treated those lower in the pecking order—they’d most likely be fired and possibly arrested. If not, I could seek work elsewhere. Contrast this with the fairly common plight of high school students who are required by law to attend school, surrounded by aggressors whom the schools can’t or won’t control or remove, and raised by parents who either can’t afford private school or don’t believe the threats their kids face.

Mr. Hazlett’s suggested escape route to nongovernment schools has appeal, and of course there are many reasons beyond an escape from abuse. I would prefer that route for my own children. Yet Mr. Gillespie’s appeal for decent schools seems not too far-fetched. Perhaps a place to start is

to hold public high schools to the standards of an adult workplace: Disagreements and dislikes are expected but must be handled with civility; frequent taunts are grounds for discipline, including removal; and threats or violence are met with police arrest. If our so-called leaders can't muster the courage to pursue the idea on moral grounds, perhaps they could accept it as vocational training.

I'm considered quite imaginative, but as a teenager I could barely foresee the long future after high school when I'd be free of daily harassment. Perhaps the hate-filled young men in Colorado could not foresee it at all.

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Chain of Complicity

Texas teacher Jerry Jesness points out what doubtless is the most pressing issue in modern public school education ("Why Johnny Can't Fail," July). A host of reforms have been proposed to improve government schools. But almost none of them deal with the fact that there is enormous pressure on teachers in all states, from all directions, to wildly exaggerate how much their students have learned.

This "grade inflation" provides a subtle and painless, but nonetheless effective, cover-up for unwarranted promotion. Students are regularly advanced to the next grade or course without anyone being embarrassed by having to admit that they learned little in the past.

If public school educators and officials and their education professor mentors read Jesness' article, doubtless most of them would object to his depiction of this "reign of mediocrity" in the schools as excessive, imaginary, and curmudgeonly. Dishonest grading of students is a matter concerning which they adopt a bunker mentality.

But there is compelling evidence in California that Jesness' charges are accurate. Approximately half of the students admitted to California State University campuses on the basis of their high school GPAs are found to be very deficient in English and mathematics skills. Consequently, they must take no-credit, high-

school-level remedial courses in these subjects before being allowed to study them at the university level.

The state universities clearly signal high school teachers that they will compensate for their irresponsibility. Education professors also are implicated in perpetuating what Jesness calls the "floating standard" for grading. They indoctrinate future teachers with the theory that grades are evil. They demonstrate their dedication to the theory by giving A's to almost all future teachers.

With the belief that grades are required yet iniquitous, most teachers sense no ethical dilemma in awarding them expediently, i.e., in any manner that makes everyone concerned the happiest. Thus, Jesness goes off track in averring that "there is no reason" there cannot be external, standardized tests "given at the end of certain courses" in school, with university admission "given to students who have scored well." In fact, everything else in his article contradicts that wishful thinking.

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Booster Boosting

Sue Blevins is right about one thing: The government should not mandate the vaccination of children ("Shots in the Dark," July). However, for parents to make informed decisions about whether to have their children vaccinated against diseases such as hepatitis B, they must have accurate information. Unfortunately, Blevins' article appears to be nothing more than rehashed anti-vaccination junk science.

The most telling point about Blevins' article is that although she strongly implies that children face a minimal risk from hepatitis B, readers who might want to find out whether the vaccine has lowered the incidence of the disease have to look elsewhere. In fact, prior to the vaccine's introduction, an estimated 20,000 children contracted hepatitis B annually, with 200 children dying every year from the disease. Since then, incidence in children has fallen 97 percent, and in 1995 only 10 children died after contracting hepatitis B. Although a large part of that decline is due

to vaccinating infants whose mothers suffer from hepatitis B, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that in more than half of all childhood cases of hepatitis B the mother does not suffer from the disease.

As Blevins correctly notes, about 300 children have died after receiving the hepatitis B vaccination. Considering that 20 million children have been vaccinated since 1991, that leaves a death rate of about 1 in 80,000. Since the overall mortality rate for children under 5 is about 640 per 80,000, this is a remarkably low incidence that strongly suggests the deaths are unrelated to the vaccine. As Michael Fumento has so aptly outlined in his excellent article on Gulf War Syndrome ("Gulf Lore Syndrome," March 1997), any time a large enough group engages in the same behavior a significant portion of them will subsequently die or suffer from illness. But this does not mean the two are in any way causally connected. In fact, there doesn't seem to be any point in the anti-hepatitis B vaccine claims that hasn't been made ad nauseum by the small minority that believe all vaccines, including the ones for diseases such as diphtheria, are extremely dangerous. Such folks also believe that vaccination has done little or nothing to protect the general population from diseases.

It's one thing to be in favor of liberty and against the state imposing its medical judgment on parents. It's another to base the defense of these views on an edifice of junk science.

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Sue Blevins replies: Brian Carnell is right that for parents to make informed choices about having their children vaccinated, they need accurate information. In the case in my article, Michael and Lorna Belkin were given no information at all about the hepatitis B vaccine. They assumed, as most parents do, that if a vaccine has been approved for newborns by the FDA, recommended by the CDC, and mandated by state governments, then that vaccine must have been adequately tested.

However, when their 5-week-old daughter died shortly after receiving the hepatitis B vaccine, the Belkins began to investigate the "science" the CDC and FDA

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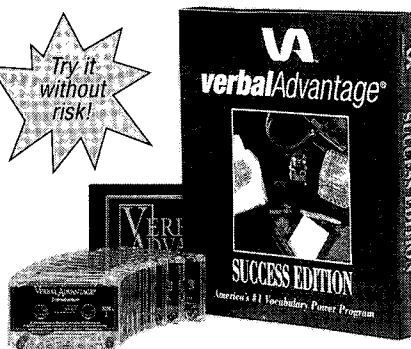
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used to justify mandatory vaccination for infants. Here is what the Belkins, along with other parents and non-government physicians, discovered:

(1) The hepatitis B vaccine was apparently never tested in a randomized, clinical, controlled study of newborns. The Belkins recently joined the National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC) in asking the federal government to open up the hepatitis B vaccine research files. In May NVIC filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the CDC and FDA for copies of all basic scientific research and epidemiological studies that government officials used to justify giving three doses of the hepatitis B vaccine to newborn infants and children under age 14. The CDC denied NVIC's request, claiming it was not in the public's interest, but NVIC is appealing and offering to pay for the data.

(2) Dr. Jane Orient, executive director of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, wrote to Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala in August asking for a moratorium on mandatory vaccination for hepatitis B pending further research. Dr. Orient stated that serious adverse effects after receiving the vaccine are reported three times as frequently as cases of hepatitis B in children under 14. Dr. Orient based her analysis on data obtained from the FDA's Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS), which contains about 25,000 reports of adverse reactions associated with the hepatitis B vaccine.

(3) CDC's method of calculating hepatitis B rates is very misleading. The CDC classifies uses these age groups: Less than 1 year old, 1-4 years old, 5-14 years old, and 15-24 years old. According to the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, in 1996 there were only 54 cases of hepatitis B in the less-than-1-year-old group, 39 cases in the 1-4 group, 186 cases in the 5-14 group, and 1,907 cases in the 15-24 group. This last group includes young adults who may have engaged in high-risk behaviors such as unprotected sex and intravenous drug use.

(4) The incidence of hepatitis B per 100,000 population was declining before the CDC recommended universal vaccination in 1991. The incidence of hepatitis B fell from 10.65 cases per 100,000 in 1987 to 7.14 cases per 100,000 in 1991. The in-

cidence continued to decline to 4.01 cases in 1996. Moreover, although the first hepatitis B vaccine was licensed in 1982, the incidence of reported cases increased between 1982 and 1985.

Brian Carnell is correct in arguing that parents need accurate information, not junk science. Unfortunately, accurate information about the hepatitis B vaccine is being withheld from parents.

Web Design and Cyberramps

I'm curious: How will pornographers make their sites accessible ("Is Your Web Site Accessible?," July)? These proposed rules can only enhance my market value as a Canadian I.T. professional since I'm sure many American Webmasters will simply relocate their pages north of the border. That's the beauty of the Net that control freaks simply cannot understand.

There are a couple of related developments up here in the Great White North: On the plus side, Canada's broadcast regulator announced that it will "not now, not ever" regulate online content. On the minus side, Quebec's Office de la Langue Française is going after the owners of English-only Web pages, arguing that the law requiring French to dominate in business communications applies to online content.

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Adam Clayton Powell III misses the mark somewhat in his criticism of Web accessibility. While I agree with him in opposing government mandates dictating how private citizens and organizations design Web sites, I also favor showing thoughtfulness in Web design as a matter of common courtesy. I don't regard this as being overly difficult if you go into it with the right mindset.

The protocols and languages of the Web were designed from the beginning to be adaptable to a wide variety of special needs. HTML, for instance, was designed to express the logical structure of a document rather than its specific presentation, leaving the details of how to present it up to the user. This allows a properly marked-up HTML document to be presented on

media as diverse as a high-end graphical workstation, a portable PalmPilot, a WebTV set-top box, or a speaking text browser for the blind. Full lists of sports scores and stock prices can be presented in text as large as the reader wishes, since there's no fixed page size or page count as with a paper publication, and browsers have a control to let the user change the font size if the original value isn't large enough.

Designers have to work hard to defeat this adaptability. They do it by contorting the markup structure to achieve visual effects, by attempting to force font sizes, line widths, and line break positions, by using text and navigational buttons in the form of graphics with no alternative text, and by creating navigation controls that require less-accessible features like Java, JavaScript, and Shockwave.

With a little bit of thought, the fancy features can be built in ways that degrade gracefully for browsers that don't support them. Such things also improve a site's position in search engines, which have as much trouble indexing a multimedia-heavy site as a handicapped person has reading and navigating it.

Incidentally, the online version of Powell's column in *Reason Online* comes out pretty well on text and speaking browsers (with some very minor quibbles). So your own site designers practice accessibility while publishing columns that criticize the concept.

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Adam Clayton Powell III replies: Daniel Tobias is correct, in my opinion, when he states that using simpler and more accessible sites is thoughtful and almost always good business.

On the Freedom Forum site, for example, we have banished Java and other animated effects because they make the site slower and more difficult to use for those with slow dial-up connections. But it will only promote innovation and progress for all, including for the disabled, if Web designers are free to innovate, even to contort the markup structure, choosing to pay the price of reduced market share or thoughtfulness.

It is time to admit the War on Drugs has failed.

Law enforcement has done its job well — with record seizures, arrests and incarceration. Despite this success, drugs are more available, less expensive and more potent. Law enforcement cannot solve the public health problem of drug abuse.

It is time for an effective strategy that will:

- Provide sufficient funding for after school programs and activity programs to meet the needs of America's youth.
- Provide sufficient funding to make treatment on request a reality within the next three years. Treatment is the most cost-effective way of reducing drug abuse.
- Provide sufficient funding to stem the health emergencies of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C. These epidemics threaten not only drug users but all Americans.
- Evaluate current drug enforcement spending to ensure it is effective and provide sufficient funding for alternatives to incarceration for non-violent, low-level drug offenders.
- Examine the racially disproportionate impact of current drug policy as well as its adverse effects on women, especially poor women and their families.
- Hold international and domestic drug law enforcement funding at current levels until they prove their effectiveness. Law enforcement has had massive funding increases over the last two decades without any proof of success.
- Undertake an examination of current drug policies to assess its impact and develop alternatives where necessary.

Funding must be shifted away from interdiction and incarceration - towards treatment and prevention.

For a complete copy of the recommendations of the National Coalition for Effective Drug Policies contact us at: 703-354-9050 or info@cspd.org

Organizations Concerned with Impact of Drug Policy:

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Drug Policy Specialists:

Common Sense for Drug Policy * Drug Reform Coordination Network * DrugSense * Drug Policy Forum of Hawaii * Drug Policy Forum of Texas * Drug Policy Foundation * Drug Policy Reform Group of Minnesota * Family Council on Drug Awareness * Family Watch * Efficacy * Harm Reduction Coalition * Human Rights and the Drug War * The Lindesmith Center * Marijuana Policy Project * Mothers Against Misuse and Abuse * Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies * National Alliance of Methadone Advocates * National Association for Public Health Policy, Council on Illicit Drugs * National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws * New Mexico Drug Policy Foundation * North American Syringe Exchange Network * November Coalition * Patients Out of Time * ReconsiDer Forum on Drug Policy * Research and Policy Reform Center * St. Ann's Corner of Harm Reduction

Field of Nightmares

By Ryan H. Sager

California's Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory was home to a prominent piece of federally funded junk science. As a result, the lab may be forced to repay more than \$800,000 in grant money. The incident involves researcher Robert P. Liburdy, who allegedly falsified some of the earliest findings that electromagnetic fields may cause cancer.

The data, published in two medical journals in 1992, purported to show the first plausible biological mechanism linking electromagnetic field exposure to cancer and other diseases; the reports helped fuel the widespread though unsubstantiated belief that power lines cause health problems (see "Shock Journalism," January 1995). Acting on a tip from a post-doctoral student working with him in 1994, lab administrators alerted the federal Office of Research Integrity (ORI), a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 1995. In June 1999, after a two-year investigation, the ORI reported that Liburdy had committed "scientific misconduct" by "intentionally falsifying and fabricating" data. The data were used to secure more federal funding.

The 51-year-old Liburdy, who resigned from the lab in March after 15 years there, agreed in May to retract three data graphs and to accept a three-year ban on receiving federal research money. He claims that he has taken these steps only to avoid an expen-

sive legal fight. But subsequent investigation into the effects of electromagnetic fields has yielded little evidence to support Liburdy's research.

Blood Drive

By Brian Doherty

On *The X-Files*, if a government agency wanted to create a genetic database from samples of everyone's blood, it would conspire in the utmost secrecy. In the real world, however, such a vampiric scheme gets announced on the front pages of the papers.

That's what happened when Attorney General Janet Reno suggested earlier this year that the federal government should take DNA samples from anyone arrested in the United States—regardless of whether the arrest leads to a conviction. In grand Washington style, she convened an expert panel called the National Commission on the Future of DNA Evidence to consider the matter.

The commission—overwhelmingly composed of cops, judges, and government attorneys—recommended in July against launching Reno's blood drive, though not for reasons that will make civil libertarians breathe a sigh of relief. For instance, the panel failed to draw attention to an important distinction between Reno's proposed register and existing

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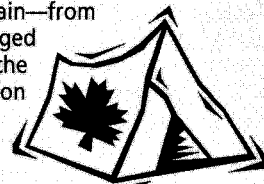
Balance Sheet

By Jeff A. Taylor

▲ **Safety First.** Nanny-state lobbying group Public Citizen frets about too few workplace inspections. Why? In 1998, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration conducted 33,697 inspections, way down from the high of 89,859 hit in 1975. Yet the 6,026 workplace deaths in 1998 was the lowest number the Bureau of Labor Statistics has ever recorded. Indeed, the number of job-related illnesses and injuries has fallen for five straight years.

▲ **Big Johnson.** Cracks in the drug prohibition monolith show as Gov. Gary Johnson (R-N.M.) floats the idea that it is time to try something else. "I believe that our war on drugs has been a dismal failure," he says. Johnson wants the feds to examine decriminalization and other options before pushing more of the same old dope.

▲ **Northern Light.** Canada's Department of National Defense plans to turn over the operation of its supply depots to private experts. Ultimately, the entire supply chain—from spare parts to fatigues—would be managed privately. A five-to-10-year contract for the work would be worth between \$50 million and \$100 million. The Canadian armed forces expect to save \$60 million to \$90 million with the deal.



▲ **Gulf Outing.** A presidential oversight board is the latest in a string of government and private panels that have found nothing to link illnesses suffered by Gulf War vets to their tours of duty. This time, no link was found to depleted uranium used in U.S. munitions. Still, the search for a villain continues.

state-level databases: The latter mostly track specific sorts of convicted criminals, such as sex offenders.

Uninterested in issues such as the risk to privacy posed by government control of such sensitive genetic information, the commission instead merely noted that the state-level DNA banks are already backlogged, with hundreds of thousands of blood samples left uncataloged. The implication seemed to be that once samples can be processed more quickly,

the commission will have no substantive objections to Reno's plan to draw blood from all arrested individuals.

Student Bodies

By Ryan H. Sager

For a half-dozen ersatz college coeds—known only as Alex, Amber, Milla, Robyn, Tamara, and Trixie—the fall semester got off to a very rocky start. These six "students" inhabit a pornographic "Voyeur Dorm" in Tampa, Florida, equipped with 40 cameras that transmit round-the-clock coverage of their every intimate action to subscribers on the World Wide Web. Although no customers actually enter the studio, Tampa's city council is upholding a finding by the

