

December 9, 2013

Jeff Jacoby writes on majority rule in science.

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The thicker that file grew, the more shrilly intolerant the alarmists became.

Over and over the True Believers insist that their view is not just widely accepted in the scientific community, but virtually unanimous apart from some crackpots. Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has likened doubters to members of a Flat Earth Society. CBS news reporter Scott Pelley, asked why his "60 Minutes" broadcasts on global warming didn't acknowledge the views of skeptics, reached for an even more wounding comparison: "If I do an interview with Elie Wiesel, am I required as a journalist to find a Holocaust denier?" ...

Paul Mirengoff asks, "Where's Chucko?" As in Hagel the SecDef.

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More on the Dud at DOD from Jonathan Tobin.

The biggest fight of the first two months of Barack Obama's second term was his determination to get his man at Defense. Former Senator Chuck Hagel had few credentials for the job other than being a Vietnam War hero and a defender of the rights of veterans. He made unforced errors such as saying he believed in tolerating a nuclear Iran and backtracked unconvincingly

from past statements in which he asserted that a “Jewish lobby” was manipulating U.S. foreign policy. These were bad enough, but even Democrats who felt obligated to give the president his choice for a key Cabinet post were dismayed at the clueless manner with which the Nebraska Republican who had endorsed Obama in 2008 and 2012 approached his confirmation hearings. He looked lost in the glare of public scrutiny and his performance when faced with tough questions did not inspire much confidence in his ability to lead America’s military or deal with the political labyrinth that anyone heading up the mammoth Department of Defense must navigate. But Obama stuck with his man and with enough Republicans refusing to filibuster the nomination, Hagel was confirmed. But fast forward a little more than nine months later and the scuttlebutt emanating from the White House appears to confirm just about everything the secretary’s critics had been saying all along.

This barely suppressed buyer’s remorse about Hagel is the conceit of a new Politico Magazine story about the DOD head. The piece aptly refers to him as the secretary who’s been on defense virtually his entire tenure as the same deer-in-the-headlights looks that astounded senators during the confirmation process are now causing concern in the West Wing. The “low energy” secretary has underwhelmed Washington, prompted criticism from both sides of the aisle and is widely seen as a political cipher who is unable to stand up to the generals inside the Pentagon or for the defense establishment in the political infighting that is part of any administration. While he has shown some signs of trying to break out of that uninspired mold recently, the enduring image of him sitting mutely next to Secretary of State John Kerry during the Syria hearings in August tells you all you need to know about what a dud he has been. Virtually every disparaging remark voiced by anonymous administration staffers echoes the points made by those who argued last winter that he had no business in the Cabinet. ...

... In one sense, Hagel is a classic example of the way second-term presidents wind up with untalented also-rans after their initial appointees either leave or burn out. Though he has largely flown under the radar since his confirmation, he is the perfect symbol for Obama’s fifth year in office during which he has lost the confidence of the public and demonstrated his inability to govern effectively on a host of issues. But he is more than a symbol. What the president needed was more than a steadier hand and tougher presence at Defense than Hagel. He needed someone of the stature of former secretary Robert Gates who, whatever his mistakes and failings, gave both Presidents Bush and Obama an alternative view to what many top advisers were whispering in their ears. Such a figure would have been invaluable this fall as Obama and Kerry rushed headlong into the arms of the Iranians in pursuit of their effort to create a new détente with the Islamist regime and to throw Israel under the bus. If Obama’s staffers now realize that Hagel is an empty suit that can’t advance their political agenda, it is the country that has lost even more by having an Obama yes-man at the Pentagon.

Meanwhile, something very interesting is showing up in our human genetic make-up. NY Times reports on the DNA extracted from 400,000 year old bones of our ancestors.

In a paper in the journal *Nature*, scientists reported Wednesday that they had retrieved ancient human DNA from a fossil dating back about 400,000 years, shattering the previous record of 100,000 years.

The fossil, a thigh bone found in Spain, had previously seemed to many experts to belong to a forerunner of Neanderthals. But its DNA tells a very different story. It most closely resembles DNA from an enigmatic lineage of humans known as Denisovans. Until now, Denisovans were known only from DNA retrieved from 80,000-year-old remains in Siberia, 4,000 miles east of where the new DNA was found.

The mismatch between the anatomical and genetic evidence surprised the scientists, who are now rethinking human evolution over the past few hundred thousand years. It is possible, for example, that there are many extinct human populations that scientists have yet to discover. They might have interbred, swapping DNA. Scientists hope that further studies of extremely ancient human DNA will clarify the mystery.

“Right now, we’ve basically generated a big question mark,” said Matthias Meyer, a geneticist at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, and a co-author of the new study.

Hints at new hidden complexities in the human story came from a 400,000-year-old femur found in a cave in Spain called Sima de los Huesos (“the pit of bones” in Spanish). The scientific team used new methods to extract the ancient DNA from the fossil.

“This would not have been possible even a year ago,” said Juan Luis Arsuaga, a paleoanthropologist at Universidad Complutense de Madrid and a co-author of the paper.

Finding such ancient human DNA was a major advance, said David Reich, a geneticist at Harvard Medical School who was not involved in the research. “That’s an amazing, game-changing thing,” he said. ...

Boston Globe

Majority rules on climate science?

by Jeff Jacoby

BACK IN 2006, around the time Al Gore’s global-warming documentary, “An Inconvenient Truth,” was released, I started a file labeled “What Climate Consensus?” Gore was insisting that “the debate among the scientists is over,” and only an ignoramus or a lackey for the fossil-fuel industry could doubt that human beings were headed for a climate catastrophe of their own making. But it didn’t take much sleuthing to discover that there was plenty of debate among scientists about the causes and consequences of global warming. Many experts were skeptical about the hyperbole of alarmists like Gore, and as I came across examples, I added them to my file.

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It seems to make no difference that those challenging the doomsday narrative include some of the world's most distinguished scientists, or that numerous experts in climatology and related earth sciences have repeatedly gone public with their critiques. To climate ideologues, they're invisible. "Ninety-seven percent of scientists agree: #climate change is real, man-made and dangerous," President Obama tweeted in May.

Really? That's not what the American Meteorological Society learned from a recent survey of its professional members. Only a bare majority, 52 percent, said that climate change is largely being driven by human activity. Scientists with a "liberal political orientation" were much more likely to regard global warming as human-caused and harmful, the survey's authors found — in fact, as a predictor of respondents' views on global warming, ideology outweighed greater expertise. "This would be strong evidence against the idea that expert scientists' views on politically controversial topics can be completely objective," the authors observe.

In that light, consider the findings of a new study published in the journal *Nature Climate Change*. Of 117 global warming predictions generated by climate-model simulations, all but three "significantly" overestimated the actual amount of warming that occurred during the past 20 years. The models typically forecast that global surface temperature would rise by more than twice as much as it did.

Why would so many scientists have relied on models that turned out to be so wrong? The authors propose several plausible explanations — volcanic eruptions? solar irradiation? — but their bottom line is that climate science still has a long way to go: "Ultimately the causes of this inconsistency will only be understood after . . . waiting to see how global temperature responds over the coming decades."

That understanding won't be advanced one millimeter by ideologues who thunder that the "science is settled." Perhaps all those climate models wouldn't have been programmed to overpredict global warming if the pressure to conform to the alarmists' view weren't so pervasive.

In a classic 1955 lecture on "The Value of Science," the celebrated physicist (and future Nobel laureate) Richard Feynman warned that science would be hobbled if it tried to stifle its doubters and skeptics. "If we want to solve a problem that we have never solved before, we must leave the door to the unknown ajar . . . [D]oubt is not to be feared but welcomed and discussed."

Science isn't settled by majority vote, and invoking "consensus" to shut off debate is authoritarian and anti-scientific. There are always inconvenient truths to challenge what the majority thinks it knows. Ninety-seven percent of experts may be impressed with the emperor's new clothes. That's no reason to silence those who insist the emperor is naked.

Power Line

Whatever happened to Chuck Hagel?

by Paul Miregoff

Earlier this year, John Kerry and Chuck Hagel took over the top jobs at the Department of State and the Department of Defense, respectively. Since then, Kerry has been hyper-active. But whatever happened to Hagel?

He has impinged on our consciousness only once, as Kerry's sidekick during congressional hearings on authorizing an attack on Syria. The impingement was slight. Kerry and Gen. Dempsey did almost all of the talking. Hagel was content with silence except for an occasional misstatement of fact (the Pentagon had to walk back his claim that Russia supplies Syria with chemical weapons).

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Hagel has impinged on the consciousness of those with whom he works at the Pentagon and in the Obama administration, but not in a positive way. That much is clear from Glenn Thrush's article in Politico Magazine. Here are some highlights:

"How would I describe him right now? He's a paper tiger," says a longtime Obama campaign and White House adviser. "He's a great guy and a war hero. The regular troops love him. It's not quite buyer's remorse, but he needs to show us more."...

Months of lackluster leadership at the Pentagon might pose a key problem for Hagel [during upcoming fights over the Defense Department's budget]...

Hagel has clearly been thrown off his politician's game by his terrible debut. He was "deeply shaken" by his self-inflicted confirmation trauma, a source who counts him as a friend told me. . . . At times, he's seemed more like a secretary on defense—an outsider squeezed between Obama's political imperatives and the Pentagon brass he's now surrounded by....

I wouldn't want those comments on my performance review.

Then there's the assessment of Tom Ricks, the Pulitzer Prize winning defense reporter. Ricks regards Hagel as "a soporific version of William Cohen," Bill Clinton's low-key second-term defense secretary, "another Senate Armed Services [Committee member] picked by a Dem late in the administration to keep the deck chairs from sloshing over the side."

"A soporific version of William Cohen." That may be the unkindest cut of all.

However, there is an upside to having a featherweight Secretary of Defense. Hagel has long talked about the need for civilian leaders to stand up to the military brass. But according to Thrush, Hagel, ever the Paper Tiger, "now finds himself increasingly motivated by [the generals']

priorities.” Thus, he is attempting to forestall defense cuts that, when added to the first round of sequester cuts, could slash as much as \$100 billion a year

Unfortunately, Hagel isn't particularly steadfast in his efforts to defense avoid cuts:

Even Hagel's allies aren't sure entirely how committed he is to holding the line on budget cuts, or even what that line is. He raised eyebrows among Senate Democrats in November by telling Majority Leader Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.), “I don't have money, but I can handle that,” during a phone conversation—which they read as a “sign of weakness,” in the words of one Democratic senator who told me about it.

That's the downside, or one of them, to having a featherweight Secretary of Defense

Contentions

[The Dud at DOD: Hagel Proves Critics Right](#)

by Jonathan S. Tobin

The biggest fight of the first two months of Barack Obama's second term was his determination to get his man at Defense. Former Senator Chuck Hagel had few credentials for the job other than being a Vietnam War hero and a defender of the rights of veterans. He made unforced errors such as saying he believed in tolerating a nuclear Iran and backtracked unconvincingly from past statements in which he asserted that a “Jewish lobby” was manipulating U.S. foreign policy. These were bad enough, but even Democrats who felt obligated to give the president his choice for a key Cabinet post were dismayed at the clueless manner with which the Nebraska Republican who had endorsed Obama in 2008 and 2012 approached his confirmation hearings. He looked lost in the glare of public scrutiny and his performance when faced with tough questions did not inspire much confidence in his ability to lead America's military or deal with the political labyrinth that anyone heading up the mammoth Department of Defense must navigate. But Obama stuck with his man and with enough Republicans refusing to filibuster the nomination, Hagel was confirmed. But fast forward a little more than nine months later and the scuttlebutt emanating from the White House appears to confirm just about everything the secretary's critics had been saying all along.

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That Hagel would be a “paper tiger”—as the headline of the Politico piece calls him—comes as no surprise. While his military service is admirable, it takes more than a war record to run an enterprise as vast as the DOD. Moreover, even when pleading his case before the Senate, he didn’t really promise us anything different. At the time, even his defenders were puzzled by his argument that he would not be the person setting policy but just a manager implementing the president’s wishes. But, with rare exceptions, that’s exactly what he has been. On all the crucial issues involving the use of the military, he hasn’t been MIA, keeping quiet even when his boss in the Oval Office wished him to speak up, such as at the hearing about putative plans for striking Syria. The president chose him in part because he shared Hagel’s “realist” views about appeasing Iran and downgrading the alliance with Israel. But he was primarily interested in having the brash former enlisted man do his bidding when it came to downsizing the defense establishment and putting generals in their place. Yet he has largely failed to do that and, in the first stirrings of independence, seems more intent on backing up the generals than in shutting them up.

Even on issues that should have been political slam-dunks for him, Hagel has faltered. Politico describes him as serving as Obama’s “human shield” on the increasingly important question of sexual assaults in the military. Rather than going along with prominent Democrats like New York’s Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who has made this her signature issue, Hagel has backed up the brass when it comes to removing investigations from the normal military chain of command, prompting her to describe him as neither showing leadership nor living up to his promises.

Though he has been of little use in helping to bridge the gap between the parties on the budget standoff, Hagel is right when he protests about the way the sequester has negatively impacted readiness and overall the ability of the military to do its job or defend the nation. And, if Politico’s sources are to be believed, he may have been a rare voice of sanity in the administration on Egypt policy and may have slightly ameliorated the damage done by both Obama and Kerry for their embrace of the deposed Muslim Brotherhood government. But his overall performance has been lackluster at best. Obama was told that Hagel was not ready for the job and those warnings have proven accurate.

In one sense, Hagel is a classic example of the way second-term presidents wind up with untalented also-rans after their initial appointees either leave or burn out. Though he has largely flown under the radar since his confirmation, he is the perfect symbol for Obama’s fifth year in office during which he has lost the confidence of the public and demonstrated his inability to govern effectively on a host of issues. But he is more than a symbol. What the president needed was more than a steadier hand and tougher presence at Defense than Hagel. He needed someone of the stature of former secretary Robert Gates who, whatever his mistakes and failings, gave both Presidents Bush and Obama an alternative view to what many top advisers were whispering in their ears. Such a figure would have been invaluable this fall as Obama and Kerry rushed headlong into the arms of the Iranians in pursuit of their effort to create a new détente with the Islamist regime and to throw Israel under the bus. If Obama’s staffers now realize that Hagel is an empty suit that can’t advance their political agenda, it is the country that has lost even more by having an Obama yes-man at the Pentagon.

NY Times

Baffling 400,000-Year-Old Clue to Human Origins

by Carl Zimmer



An artist's interpretation of the hominins that lived near the Sima de los Huesos cave in Spain.

In a paper in the journal *Nature*, scientists [reported](#) Wednesday that they had retrieved ancient human DNA from a fossil dating back about 400,000 years, shattering the previous record of 100,000 years.

The fossil, a thigh bone found in Spain, had previously seemed to many experts to belong to a forerunner of Neanderthals. But its DNA tells a very different story. It most closely resembles DNA from an enigmatic lineage of humans known as Denisovans. Until now, Denisovans were known only from DNA retrieved from 80,000-year-old remains in Siberia, 4,000 miles east of where the new DNA was found.

The mismatch between the anatomical and genetic evidence surprised the scientists, who are now rethinking human evolution over the past few hundred thousand years. It is possible, for example, that there are many extinct human populations that scientists have yet to discover. They might have interbred, swapping DNA. Scientists hope that further studies of extremely ancient human DNA will clarify the mystery.

“Right now, we’ve basically generated a big question mark,” said Matthias Meyer, a geneticist at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, and a co-author of the new study.

Hints at new hidden complexities in the human story came from a 400,000-year-old femur found in a cave in Spain called Sima de los Huesos (“the pit of bones” in Spanish). The scientific team used new methods to extract the ancient DNA from the fossil.

“This would not have been possible even a year ago,” said Juan Luis Arsuaga, a paleoanthropologist at Universidad Complutense de Madrid and a co-author of the paper.

Finding such ancient human DNA was a major advance, said David Reich, a geneticist at Harvard Medical School who was not involved in the research. “That’s an amazing, game-changing thing,” he said.

Since the 1970s, Spanish scientists have brought out a wealth of fossils from the cave dating back hundreds of thousands of years. “The place is very special,” said Dr. Arsuaga, who has found 28 nearly complete skeletons of humans during three decades of excavations.

The skeleton of a hominin recovered from Sima de los Huesos.



Based on the anatomy of the fossils, Dr. Arsuaga has argued that they belonged to ancestors of Neanderthals, which lived in western Asia and Europe from about 200,000 to 30,000 years ago.

When Dr. Meyer and his colleagues drilled into the femur, they found ancient human DNA inside, just as they had hoped.

“Our expectation was that it would be a very early Neanderthal,” Dr. Meyer said.

But the DNA did not match that of Neanderthals. Dr. Meyer then compared it to the DNA of the Denisovans, the ancient human lineage that he and his colleagues had discovered in Siberia in 2010. He was shocked to find that it was similar.

“Everybody had a hard time believing it at first,” Dr. Meyer said. “So we generated more and more data to nail it down.”

The extra research confirmed that the DNA belonged on the Denisovan branch of the human family tree.

The new finding is hard to reconcile with the picture of human evolution that has been emerging based on fossils and ancient DNA. Denisovans were believed to be limited to East Asia, and they were not thought to look so Neanderthal-like.

Based on previously discovered ancient DNA and fossil evidence, scientists generally agreed that humans’ direct ancestors shared a common ancestor with Neanderthals and Denisovans that lived about half a million years ago in Africa.

Their shared ancestors split off from humans’ lineage and left Africa, then split further into the Denisovans and Neanderthals about 300,000 years ago. The evidence suggested that Neanderthals headed west, toward Europe, and that the Denisovans moved east.

Humans’ ancestors, meanwhile, stayed in Africa, giving rise to Homo sapiens about 200,000 years ago. Humans then expanded from Africa into Asia and Europe about 60,000 years ago. They then interbred not only with Neanderthals, but with Denisovans, too. Later, both the Denisovans and Neanderthals became extinct.

“Now we have to rethink the whole story,” Dr. Arsuaga said.

Dr. Arsuaga doubts that Denisovans were spread out across so much of the Old World, from Spain to Siberia, masquerading as Neanderthals.

One alternative explanation is that the humans of Sima de los Huesos were not true Neanderthals, but belonged to the ancestors of both Denisovans and Neanderthals.

It is also possible that the newly discovered DNA was passed to both Neanderthals and Denisovans, but eventually disappeared from Neanderthals, replaced by other variants.

“It got lost in one lineage but made its way in the other,” suggested Jean-Jacques Hublin, a Max Planck paleoanthropologist who was not involved in the research.

Beth Shapiro, an expert on ancient DNA at the University of California, Santa Cruz, favors an even more radical possibility: that the humans of Sima de los Huesos belong to yet another

branch of humans. They might have been a species called Homo erectus, which originated about 1.8 million years ago and became extinct within the last few hundred thousand years.

“The more we learn from the DNA extracted from these fossils, the more complicated the story becomes,” Dr. Shapiro said.

This complicated story has come to light only because of advances over the past 20 years in retrieving ancient DNA.

When an organism dies, its DNA breaks down into smaller and smaller fragments, while also becoming contaminated with the DNA of other species like soil bacteria. So piecing the fossil DNA together is a bit like putting together a jigsaw puzzle created by a sadist.

In 1997, Svante Paabo of the Max Planck Institute and his colleagues, who had pioneered the techniques for retrieving DNA fragments, [published](#) a snippet of DNA from a Neanderthal fossil dating back about 40,000 years. They and other scientists then built on this success by searching for bits of DNA from other Neanderthals.

In 2006, a team of French and Belgian researchers obtained a fragment of Neanderthal DNA dating back [100,000 years, which until now](#) held the record for the oldest human DNA ever found.

Meanwhile, using improved methods, Dr. Paabo, Dr. Meyer and their colleagues [assembled](#) a rough draft of the entire Neanderthal genome in 2010.

That discovery shed light on how Neanderthals and humans’ ancestors split from a common ancestor hundreds of thousands of years ago. It also revealed that Neanderthals and humans interbred [about 50,000 years ago](#).

Around the same time as that discovery, Russian collaborators sent the Max Planck team 80,000-year-old fossils they had found in a cave in Siberia called Denisova. When the German scientists sequenced the entire genome from the finger bone of a girl, it turned out to be neither human nor Neanderthal, but from a [separate lineage](#), which Dr. Paabo and his colleagues named Denisovans.

Dr. Meyer is hopeful that he and his colleagues will be able to get more DNA from the Spanish fossil, as well as other fossils from the site, to help solve the puzzle they have now stumbled across. “It’s extremely hard to make sense of,” Dr. Meyer said. “We still are a bit lost here.”



LIBERAL HEAD EXPLOSION

WW2 Navajo Code Talkers Appear in Redskins Jackets



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