

Hoaxes and Hobgoblins

William Leiss (4 November 2011)

This past September we learned of The University of Calgary's embarrassment over the discovery that oil industry funds had been moved through its research accounts to carry out non-research activities dealing with climate change issues.¹ These funds were used to support the activities of a group calling itself, somewhat mischievously, "Friends of Science" (<http://www.friendsofscience.org/>). Of course one thinks immediately of the old saw: "With friends such as this, who needs enemies"? Is the irony implicit in the name intended or not (the case would be more interesting if it were).

Be that as it may, there is a fine historical parallel in the naming. The following quotation is from Walter Isaacson's biography, *Einstein* (New York: Knopf, 2007), pp. 284-5: "[In 1920 Paul] Weyland published articles denouncing relativity as 'a big hoax' and formed a ragtag (but mysteriously well-funded) organization grandly dubbed the Study Group of German Scientists for the Preservation of a Pure Science."² Sound familiar?

[Allegations of hoaxes perpetrated by scientists, of which the calumny about Einstein and the theory of relativity may be the first case, are a most interesting phenomenon. It is of course now a standard feature of climate science debates; another important recent case involves AIDS: see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AIDS_denialism.]

For those more interested in climate science than hoaxes, see the fine piece of reputable and balanced science journalism, by Michael LePage, in the October 22-28, 2011 issue of the magazine *New Scientist*. [<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn21049> ; the online version has links to relevant scientific studies. Access requires (free) registration.]

¹ http://www.ucalgary.ca/news/sept2011/friends_of_science; Vancouver Sun, 09/15/11 : <http://tinyurl.com/3dvscdr>; Postmedia News, 09/16/11 (Talisman): <http://tinyurl.com/3pvfptv>.

² For background on Weyland's attack on Einstein see the following sources. <http://www.physik.uni-halle.de/Fachgruppen/history/weyland.htm>; http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Weyland (Google will translate from the German).