

Foster links Darwin, Hitler

The former City Council member even cites evolution in the Columbine shootings.

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Darwin's theory of evolution helped fuel the rise of Hitler and contributed to the school-shooting massacre at Columbine, a former St. Petersburg City Council member wrote in a letter urging the Pinellas County School Board to expose students to alternative theories.

"Evolution gives our kids an excuse to believe in natural selection and survival of the fittest, which leads to a belief that they are superior over the weak," Bill Foster wrote board members in a letter received this week. "This is a slippery slope."

He continued: "One of the Columbine shooters wrote on his Web site, 'You know what I love? Natural selection! It's the best thing that ever happened to the Earth. Getting rid of all the stupid and weak organisms.'"

Foster's letter comes in the midst of an increasingly emotional tug-of-war over the state's proposed new science standards, which embrace Charles Darwin's theory as the fundamental pillar of modern biology. The current standards, written in 1996, do not mention the word "evolution."

The state Board of Education is scheduled to vote on the issue Feb. 19.

Foster, who recently stepped down after being term-limited from office, is widely considered to be a leading contender to be St. Petersburg's next mayor in 2009. He said Friday he wrote the letter, which appears on his law firm's stationery, as the concerned parent of a high school student.

"I'm not interested in taking this on as my own personal crusade," Foster said. "I just wanted them to hear from the parent of someone they're teaching that I would appreciate it if they would tolerate another view."

Foster isn't the first Darwin critic to attempt to link evolutionary theory to violence and racism, but he is the first public figure in the Florida debate to do so.

After the Columbine shooting in 1999, then-U.S. Rep. Tom DeLay cited Darwin's theory as a contributing factor, reading a letter into the Congressional Record that said public schools "teach the children that they are nothing but glorified apes who have evolutionized out of some primordial soup of mud." This summer, Fort Lauderdale's Coral Ridge Ministries aired a TV special on Christian cable called Darwin's Deadly Legacy.

"To put it simply, no Darwin, no Hitler," said the group's late founder, D. James Kennedy.

Foster echoed those words in his letter: "Adolf Hitler duped an entire generation using Darwin's evolution," he wrote. "He sought to preserve the 'favored' race in the struggle for survival."

That notion is a selective reading of science and history, said Florida State University professor Michael Ruse, an authority on the history and philosophy of science.

Ruse said Nazi ideologues were motivated by many factors, including "social Darwinism," a movement that tried to apply natural concepts like "survival of the fittest" to human society. But the Nazis later

distanced themselves from Darwin because rather than promoting racial superiority, evolution showed "Aryans and Jews and Gypsies and Slavs were all one stem," he said.

Ruse also noted that during the Civil War, both supporters and opponents of slavery cited the Bible to back their positions. "In the name of Darwin, just like in the name of Jesus, we find contradictory philosophies," he said.

In his letter, Foster asked board members to consider allowing the discussion of alternative theories in the classroom.

"I think that's what's been lacking," he said Friday. "I'm not asking the school board to teach the Genesis account. I'm asking simply that they allow discussion on it."

He continued: "They have been teaching evolution as a hard and scientific fact. Some of the kids end up going to church and synagogue and they learn about the creator and they say, 'Wait a minute.'"

The St. Petersburg Times reported Dec. 18 that four of seven Pinellas school board members supported the teaching of alternative theories. But the issue has not come before the board, and board member Janet Clark said she would be surprised if it did, despite Foster's request.

"As an attorney, he should realize there have been court cases on this topic," Clark said. "Encouraging the school district to open what would be a legal can of worms is not very good legal advice."

To date, at least three school boards - in Baker, Taylor and Holmes counties, all in North Florida - have passed resolutions objecting to the proposed standards. And at least one other county, St. John's, is likely to consider doing so.

The Taylor County resolution says the standards should be revised "so that evolution is presented as one of several theories as to how the universe was formed." The Baker County resolution asks for a change "so evolution is not presented as fact."

The draft standards say evolution is "the fundamental concept underlying all of biology." They say students should be able to recognize that "small genetic differences between parents and offspring can accumulate in successive generations so that descendants are very different from their ancestors," and that "fossil evidence is consistent with the idea that human beings evolved from earlier species."

Some polls show a majority of Americans do not believe Darwin's theory, even though the vast majority of scientists consider it sound.

In his letter, Foster said he learned about Darwin in a class at Northeast High School, where a teacher told him, "There is really no scientific evidence to support this theory, but if you want to believe that you descended from monkeys, then feel free to do so."

Becky Steele, a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, called those statements embarrassing.

Foster's letter is "Exhibit 1 for why we need to change our science standards, for the profound misunderstandings it reveals," she said.

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