



# Reality Check

A publication of the Rationalists of East Tennessee  
www.rationalists.org



## REALITY CHECK REIMAGINED!

We are proud to announce the return of *Reality Check*, RET's periodic mini-magazine. There are high hopes for our publication to become a lively forum for the exchange of ideas and lots of interesting information!

One of our goals for future publications is a point-counterpoint exchange on a topic of interest. Our group is made of up many people of diverse opinions and great intelligence.

But we're not all about debate and weighty ideas – there are more kinds of fun than that. We're hoping for recipes from members, tips for fun day trips in the East Tennessee area, movie and restaurant reviews, original poetry, or previews of upcoming RET events.

The editors can't do it all ourselves; this is intended to be a group effort! Feel free to contact the editors to offer your contributions, and we hope to have a long and successful run!

### BIG NAMES, BIG IDEAS

The Rationalists of East Tennessee have attracted some very good talent to speak at recent events.

In February, we were visited by Herb Silverman, from the Secularists of the Low Country. Mr. Silverman spoke about his campaign for Governor of South Carolina and his long legal battle to become a notary public despite a law prohibiting atheists from holding public office – even notaries. We also learned about the power of political organization and some political networking between naturalist, rationalist, secularist, humanist, skeptic, and atheist groups around the country, and the exciting news that a full-time lobbyist has been hired by the Secular Coalition of America to present the point of view of the one in seven Americans who do not subscribe to any organized religious beliefs in the nation's corridors of power. RET will match contributions to support this effort up to \$500.

In March, we heard from local radio host and University of Tennessee lecturer Mark Harmon in a fascinating discussion of how the mass media works, how political and social ideas are communicated through society, and how to identify political bias and its sources in modern journalism. Certainly, his claim that the media suffers from a *right-wing*, pro-corporate bias will not meet with universal agreement, beginning within our own group – but there was no shortage of ideas to consider after Mr. Harmon's lecture!

RET events are almost always thought provoking and intellectually stimulating, and our recent speakers have set a high standard for future events to follow!

### Opinions Wanted!

Which does Tennessee need more: tort reform or insurance reform?

Contact Erik Gunderson ([eg@gssh.com](mailto:eg@gssh.com)) to contribute.

## President's Page

Philip W. King III

I look forward to the upcoming year for the Rationalists of East Tennessee (RET). It is with humility that I begin my stint as President of this organization. During the past ten years, I have found RET to be an organization of terrific people-thinkers, debaters, concerned citizens — in short, stimulating people with whom to associate.

The Rationalists of East Tennessee provides an alternative in our community for people who are disinclined to affiliate with the more traditional worldviews. We offer a naturalistic world view — one dominated not by a punitive god who casts humans in a sinful state, and not by explanations of phenomena which are not yet understood as "spiritual." We are, in short, dedicated to the notion that life can be interpreted through our senses and that there need be no complicated explanations based on dogma.

While we respect others' views, we nevertheless don't want to stand by and have narrow

interpretations of religious writings imposed on the great country in which we live. The United States has a strong, secular history; an experiment, if you please, deriving from our founders' experiences with a religion-dominated Europe. RET wants to be a strong, activist organization squarely on the side of preserving our secular heritage — a heritage that preserves everyone's right to practice his or her religion without entangling the state in the religious doctrines of any one sect.

RET members also want the same respect that we accord others. Our members often categorize themselves with different words: skeptics, freethinkers, agnostics, atheists, humanists, etc. However, the word, "atheist" is probably most often the term that is denigrated in discussions among our East Tennessee citizens, and we want to change the concept that people have. Our members respect the rights of all citizens, laying aside racial, religious, and sexual matters. We want all citizens to be treated

fairly by our government. And we want, ourselves, to be treated fairly by our government and in casual conversation. The word "atheist" simply means "without theism." An atheist is someone who has a worldview that does not include the supernatural. It does not mean that person is an "evil" person.

My goal this year is to double the membership of the Rationalists of East Tennessee. I believe there are many more people in our community who, while not currently active members of RET, nevertheless share many of our views. I invite you to join us in providing an alternative to the good people of East Tennessee a place to socialize, to think, to debate, among friends who share many of these same values.

RET's Directors are:
Dale Haste (VP), Chuck Janack, Phil King (President), Aleta Ledendecker (Secretary), Carl Ledendecker, Laura Marty, John McCaffrey (Treasurer), Lorrie Powdrill, and Laura Webb

## PROFILE IN HUMANISM

Andrew Carnegie was born on November 25, 1835 in Scotland, the son of a politically active but poor cotton weaver. In 1848, the family borrowed £20 to emigrate to Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Fifteen-year-old Andrew worked in a cotton factory along with his father, earning \$1.20 per week.

He was a voracious reader, borrowing books wherever he could, whether from private collections or trade groups' libraries. As a teenager, he wrote to newspapers across America urging the abolition of slavery, and to friends in Scotland extolling the virtues of American democracy. He was not tall (5'2") but he became a giant amongst men because he was smart, ambitious, and capable. By 18, he had become the administrator of the western region of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company.

Carnegie invested in sleeping cars for railroads and then reinvested the proceeds in telegraphs, agriculture, oil, and steel mills. All of his products and services were in high demand during the Civil War, and Carnegie profited handsomely as a contractor to the Union Army. He was drafted in 1864, and like many wealthy men paid \$200 for a "replacement" soldier, but he also paid the man who served in his place an additional \$850, while still servicing the Union Army. He could afford it – the previous year he had made \$42,000 from his oil and telegraph ventures.

Politically active even as young man, Carnegie advocated abolition of slavery in the US and of the British monarchy. He

owned over twenty intellectual journals, newspapers, and magazines in both countries. He was one of the first modern capitalists to offer his workers equity as well as cash, and some steelworkers became millionaires. He fostered competition between his subordinates, creating bitter rivalries. His companies were always private; he never sold stock to the public. But he was not without contradiction; he professed that beginning one's life in poverty (as he had) formed good moral character, and paid his workers accordingly. Although he claimed to be in favor of unions, he broke a strike while working for the Pennsylvania Railroad, and allowed a business partner to use violence to break a strike against one of his steel mills.

Carnegie was an avowed atheist from a young age. "I don't believe in God. My God is patriotism. Teach a man to be a good citizen and you have solved the problem of life." In his autobiography, Carnegie described how he discarded religious belief through the study of evolution while in "... doubt about theology, including the supernatural element, and indeed the whole scheme of salvation through vicarious atonement and all the fabric built upon it, I came fortunately upon Darwin's and Spencer's works... I remember that light came as in a flood and all was clear. Not only had I got rid of theology and the supernatural, but I had found the truth in evolution."

At 33, Carnegie announced he would resign from commerce in two years to pursue a scholarly life on "only" \$50,000 a year. This did not happen. Instead,



Carnegie befriended Sir Harry Bessemer and learned a new way to make steel. Armed with this knowledge, Carnegie decided to "put all his eggs in one basket, and then watch the basket." He invested all his money into a steel mill, and from it grew a network of companies which later became known as U.S. Steel. Under Carnegie's leadership, the United States became the world's most powerful industrial nation, and Carnegie made millions of dollars every year doing it.

In 1886, he wrote *Triumphant Democracy*, a book in which he used statistical evidence to support his thesis that the USA surpassed the wealth and power of the British Empire because of its democratic government. The book became a "best-seller" and was the first glimpse most Americans had of the country's economic progress. Carnegie wrote in his 1889 essay "The Gospel of Wealth" that the wealthy have a moral duty to benefit society through philanthropy. Carnegie focused his philanthropic activities on disseminating and developing knowledge through libraries, performing arts centers, and museums.

He married Louise Whitfield in 1887, and they had one daughter, Margaret, who was

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*This month's recipe:* **Mocha Fudge Brownies**

½ cup margarine or butter  
2 squares (2 oz.) unsweetened chocolate  
1 cup sugar  
2 eggs  
2 Tbsp sour cream  
1 tsp vanilla  
1 tsp instant coffee  
¾ cup all purpose flour  
½ cup semi-sweet chocolate chips

In a medium saucepan, melt margarine and chocolate over low heat. Remove from heat. Stir in sugar, eggs, sour cream, vanilla and coffee. Mix by hand just until combined. Stir in flour. Stir in chips. Do not over beat mixture. Spread batter into a greased 8x8x2-inch baking pan. Bake in 350 deg oven for 30 minutes. Cool on wire rack. Cut into squares.  
- Patty McCaffrey

*(Profile in Humanism, c'tnd)*

born in 1897. To them, Carnegie wrote "...I know workmen, and many so-called poor men, who revel in luxuries beyond the power of those millionaires to reach. It is the mind that makes the body rich." He believed that the true measure of life was not how much money he acquired, but rather how he used that money to better the lives of others, and that education and freedom were the keys to making other good works possible.

His fantastic wealth gave Carnegie the opportunity to make extravagant gestures. After the Spanish-American War, the USA paid Spain \$20,000,000 to "purchase" the Philippines. Carnegie offered the same amount of money to purchase the

Philippines' freedom himself, and create an independent democracy there.

Carnegie sold his businesses to J.P. Morgan in 1901, for \$240,000,000 in gold bonds. A special vault was built in a New Jersey bank to house Carnegie's bond certificates. "The man who dies thus rich, dies disgraced," he said, and by his death eighteen years later, he had given away more than \$350,000,000 in educational philanthropies. Another \$30,000,000 was given in his will – at a time when a family of four could live with reasonable comfort on \$2,000 a year.

He endowed over 3,000 libraries in seven countries, and founded many music halls, theaters, and what is today known as Carnegie Mellon University. Carnegie

also funded Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute for African Americans, and founded the Endowment for International Peace, which studies the causes of wars and uses political activism to prevent them.

He is remembered as a philanthropist and an industrialist, but is best understood as a humanist. A vigorous and lifelong advocate for democracy, education, racial equality, and reason; he built libraries, not churches; and urged that people work to make the lives of others better in this world rather than the next. Over the doors of The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, his own wishes and his true epitaph are carved: "Free to the People."

-Erik Gunderson