

Notes & Briefs

Blackwater Fallout, Caves on Mars, Missing Mass, etc.

In late September 2007, a 51-year-old Brazilian woman gave birth to her own grandchildren. Brazilian law requires that only close relatives may serve as surrogate mothers; after her 27-year-old daughter suffered four years of failed attempts at pregnancy, she accepted four embryos from her and bore her twin sons. Earlier this year, a Greek woman also gave birth to twin grandsons under similar circumstances.

In contrast to these complicated family trees, an unmarried 60-year-old Japanese woman is currently pregnant with a donated embryo—a first in Japan, where fertility treatments are ordinarily restricted to married couples. Many women who become pregnant through IVF off-shore cannot obtain obstetrical care on their return; this one, who traveled to the United States for the procedure, has found an ally in Dr. Yahiro Netsu. Though he has been involved in controversial surrogate pregnancies before, he did confess to some concern in this case: “She is sixty years old and single. I

hesitated in my mind about whether this pregnancy should continue when I thought about the risk and the future of the child.”

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It turns out that James Hansen, the global warming researcher known as the “NASA whistleblower” for claiming in 2006 that the Bush administration was muzzling him, has been getting money from George Soros, the billionaire financier of left-wing groups like MoveOn.org. According to a September 2007 report in *Investor’s Business Daily*, Hansen received as much as \$720,000 for “legal and media advice” from Soros’s Open Society Institute (OSI). Considering that Hansen aired his claims about being “muzzled” on the front page of the *New York Times* and in a *60 Minutes* interview, it seems the pricey “media advice” paid off handsomely. It is telling that a government scientist like Hansen, who preens and postures about political interference in his work, should be in the pay of an overtly political organization; that he is able to get

away with it with hardly a peep from the press is deeply disappointing.

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James Stephen Fossett, a record-breaking aviator and all-around adventurer, was reported missing on September 3, 2007 after taking off in a small single-engine plane from a private airstrip in Nevada. With the help of satellite images and mapping software from Google, flocks of Internet-savvy individuals embarked on a virtual hunt for visual evidence of Fossett's presumed plane wreck. Although Fossett himself has yet to be found, searchers located approximately two hundred hitherto unknown plane-crash sites—furnishing new leads on other, sometimes decades-old, unsolved disappearances in the mountainous regions of Nevada.

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In the previous issue of this journal, Habib Moody detailed some of the problems with the U.S. government's employment of private contractors in Iraq. Since then, the Iraqi government has revoked the license of Blackwater, the largest of the U.S. State Department's private security contractors, to operate in Iraq. This was the result of a September 16, 2007 incident in which seventeen Iraqis were killed and two dozen others injured in a Baghdad clash with a Blackwater security detail escorting State Department officials. Peter W. Singer, a Brookings Institution senior fellow and an expert on private military contractors, calls the Iraqi government's decision "inevitable," noting the lack of transparency

or authority the U.S. government has over its contractors, the history of Blackwater's previous missteps over the years, and the opportunity this action created for Iraqi officials to appease angry citizens by punishing contractors while avoiding direct conflict with U.S. troops.

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The official prototype of the kilogram, a 118-year-old cylinder tucked away inside a triple-locked safe in a chateau outside Paris, is mysteriously losing weight, according to physicist Richard Davis of the International Bureau of Weights and Measures in Sevres. Although the kilogram is made "of the same material"—a platinum and iridium alloy—and was made "at the same time and kept under the same conditions" as duplicate prototype masses, it nonetheless is about fifty micrograms lighter than expected. "We don't really have a good hypothesis" to explain why, Davis said.

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The Hammer Museum in Haines, Alaska, the world's only museum devoted to the oldest human tool, is fighting for the right to its name. Last year, the larger and wealthier Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Culture in Los Angeles—founded in 1990 by the oil industrialist Armand Hammer—filed an application to trademark the shortened name "Hammer Museum," prompting tool museum founder Dave Pahl to file a competing application. The Los Angeles museum, which has an annual revenue of \$10.2 million, lists twenty-six lawyers on

the application; Pahl, whose museum took in \$8,104 last year (mostly from t-shirt sales), is going it alone. "This little museum is trying hard to stay afloat," he said. Pahl has been collecting hammers since 1989. He used to buy them at antique stores; now he deals on the Internet. "When we got a computer," his wife said, "it just opened up a world of hammers." The collection includes cattle-stunning hammers, check-canceling hammers, an Asian gong hammer, a nineteen-foot-long wooden hammer, and a 1928 campaign hammer for New York congressional hopeful E. Watson Gardiner, who lost the election.

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The Chinese government has reportedly backed away from some of the more offensive slogans promoting its "one-child" family-planning policy, sensing that less-than-inspiring maxims such as "Raise fewer babies but more piggies" and "One more baby means one more tomb" are not likely to attract cooperation. In May 2007, thousands of farmers rioted to protest the policy and the draconian fines used to enforce it—"Houses toppled, cows confiscated, if abortion demand

rejected," as one slogan bluntly puts it. Uneasy with the negative attention, the government issued a list of acceptable alternatives, including "Mother Earth is too tired to sustain more children" and "Both boys and girls are parents' hearts."

In the meantime, officials are looking for more creative ways to crack down on wealthy urban couples who can afford to flout the one-child limit and pay the hefty fine. In September 2007, the government announced that these violators will get a black mark on their credit record. Other schemes have involved attempts at public humiliation by publishing a list of violators' names.

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The Mars Odyssey spacecraft has collected visual evidence of caves on Mars. Dubbed the "Seven Sisters," the cave openings are high up on volcano Arsia Mons near the tallest mountain on Mars. Odyssey detected a daily temperature fluctuation much less than that on the surface, prompting some suggestion that the caves may once have been a hospitable environment for life. But because of their extreme altitude, these particular caves are unlikely to have ever hosted life.