



# The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

[www.SBHumanists.org](http://www.SBHumanists.org)

MAY 2026

## *Humanity's Debt to Africa: Evolution, Humanism, and the Legacy of 8 Million Years of African Descent*

**Our Program:** Dr. David Orenstein will guide participants through the history of human evolution with a presentation featuring detailed scientific evidence and a comprehensive overview of the pioneering researchers behind these discoveries.

The presentation is designed to equip the audience with clear, accurate information that can be effectively communicated in discussions requiring a robust defense of evolutionary theory.

**Our Speaker:** Dr. David I. Orenstein is Department Chair and a tenured full professor of anthropology at Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York. He has taught human evolution, primatology, science history, and science advocacy.



**Dr. David Orenstein**

He has been affiliated with the American Humanist Association (AHA) for more than a decade and now serves on its Board of Directors. Dr. Orenstein served as the AHA representative to the United Nations for five years, and is an ordained Humanist Clergy.

Dr. Orenstein also serves on the Smithsonian Institute, Hall of Human Origins Broader Social Impacts Committee Board. He is also the author of three books. He is a happy freethinker and humanist who believes life is best lived with reason and joy for the human condition.

This event is free and open to the public. It is co-sponsored by the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara and the Freethought Society.

**When:** Sunday May 17, 3:00-4:30 pm Pacific

**Where:** On Zoom: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

## The HSSB Secular Circular – May 2026

### The Best of Times – The Worst of Times Jeremy Berg 4-18-26

By Judy Flattery

I first met Jeremy Berg in 1975 at a National Science Foundation Student Science Training Program in Mathematics at San Diego State University. We were among 50 High School juniors selected for this intensive 6-week program. It was my first exposure to California and made a lasting impression on my view of myself as someone who could expand my world beyond the comfortable confines of the suburbs of Buffalo. I went on to become the first engineer in my extended family, earned a master's degree in business, and enjoyed a long career in industry. I am grateful to the National Science Foundation for that opportunity. Jeremy Berg, enjoyed an incredible career in science, science leadership, science publishing, and academia.

He is currently a Professor of Computational and Systems Biology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. He received his B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in chemistry. He started as an Assistant Professor of Chemistry at Johns Hopkins University in 1986. He moved to the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine as Director of the Department of Biophysics and Biophysical Chemistry in 1990.

In 2003, he became Director of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) at the National Institute of Health (NIH). He served at NIGMS until July 2011 when he moved to the University of Pittsburgh.

Berg served as Editor-in-Chief of the *Science* family of journals from 2016-2019. His efforts have been recognized with numerous research, teaching, and public service awards. He is an elected member of the National Academy of Medicine and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.



The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

The title of his talk is a reference to Charles Dickens' book, *A Tale of Two Cities*, set during the French Revolution. It reflects his view that this is both the best and worst of times for science, and that we are now living in a time of eroding democracy and growing authoritarianism. He states that it is time for us to stand up and take back our form of government in support of reason and our democratic principles, which will also support advances in science for the betterment of life here on Earth.

It's 'The Best of Times' for science because of the unprecedented opportunities in both fundamental research and its translation to human health: formerly fatal cancers that are now treatable, deep knowledge of biology that enables researchers to focus on the systemic interactions enabled by having solved the protein structure/folding problem (AlphaFold 3, Nobel Prize 2024), progress on Alzheimer's, and other transformational advances.

Researchers previously studied one molecule at a time. They didn't have the tools to deal with interactions. Now they can model interactions at a systems level. This is analogous to the difference between understanding an individual human being's actions vs. understanding complicated human interactions at a community or societal level. Experiments that were previously unthinkable are now routine.

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In his three years at *Science* magazine, Berg noted that a project which would stand out as important and immediately publishable when he started, would be far less likely to be published near the end of his 3-1/2 year term because the new research tools enabled much greater advances and set much higher expectations for publishing... frustrating for the researcher who expended all the effort, but good for scientific advancement overall.

The problem of predicting structures from amino acid sequences has been a challenge since the 1950s; it was solvable in principle. We made some incremental progress over the first 50 years. Then Deep Mind, a Google UK subsidiary, created an AI learning tool that can solve this for many (not all) amino acid sequences. It used data collected by academic scientists in a huge database; problems that used to take years of effort are now solvable in 10 minutes on the internet. This opens up the possibility of asking more interesting questions.

Berg illustrated ‘The Worst of Times’ with Picasso’s *Guernica* littered with expressions of the actions and key phrases of the current administration’s assault on the NIH and NSF.

### The Worst of Times



Some of those phrases:

Contracts severed

Grant terminations

Grant “Remediation”

Staff Firings and Reductions in Force

Banned phrases

STEM Education Targeting

Irregular Search Processes

Targeting Institutions

Thoughtless centralization

Hiring Cronies

NSF Director Designate a Non-Scientist

“Ideological Boondoggles”

Disrupted Clinical Trials

Retaliation Against Staff

Irregular Search Processes

International Collaboration Disruptions

“Awaiting Guidance”

“Curing DEI”

Payment freezes

NSF Headquarters “Relocation”

Delayed Renewals

Political Appointee Bottlenecks

With Donald Trump’s election Berg expected policy disputes and reform initiatives, but what actually happened has been much more severe and damaging than he ever imagined. And, it seems that new threats and issues arise weekly if not daily. Berg is spending more than half his time over the past 15 months working on understanding what is happening and communicating to attorneys, the press, and the public; and rallying resistance to protect what we can do to mitigate damage.

He now has some funding from a private philanthropist (instead of this being his hobby) but he can’t imagine not doing it. He said that if you ever wondered what you would have done had you lived in 1930s Germany, it’s what you’re doing now. “This may sound stark,” he said, but it’s time to stand up and push back and learn from people who are studying the situation.

He then reviewed a flowchart showing how an idea for a scientific project becomes an NIH grant. The flowchart listed 14 steps: 5 are the responsibility of the investigator or their university, 2 are the responsibility of outside experts, and 7 are the responsibility of NIH or the funding agency. Berg is very familiar with every step of the process having been a grant applicant, a grantee, a reviewer, an NIH institute

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director, then an applicant and grantee again. He thoroughly understands the process.

NIH is composed of 27 institutes and centers. It's a complicated organization. A grant starts with an idea, a proposal budget, which is submitted and undergoes multilevel reviews. A funding decision is made by staff, approved by the director, then executed. This is communicated to the institution who then spends funds and requests reimbursement (Berg joked that the NIH is sometimes referred to as the 'National Institute of Reimbursements'). Normally, there is a 1<sup>st</sup> year approval with a commitment for future years (typically 4) assuming good progress is being made and documented. After that, the grantee can reapply for 4 more years. etc.

More than half of the institute director positions are currently vacant and are being filled by acting directors. The process to fill these open positions is slow and very irregular. It's tough to schedule meetings. Grants are frozen or terminated and the renewal processes are messed up. It's a multi-pronged assault on the whole process which has broken the trust between the scientific community and the NIH.

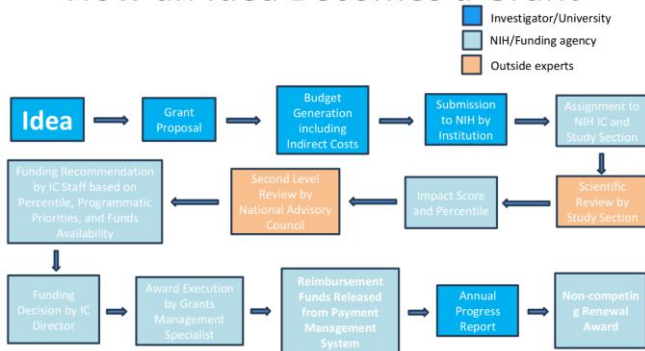
Some examples: in the past, perhaps 10 grants per year were terminated at the request of the institution. This could happen if the investigator died, or was found guilty of research or sexual misconduct, for example—very rare and never irrational.

In contrast, over the past year >5000 grants were terminated, at least temporarily, or otherwise disrupted because they were “not aligned with the agency priorities.” This included anything deemed 'DEI', anything involving transgender or LGBTQIA health, vaccine hesitancy, or the impact of climate change. Berg sees this as targeted both on the topics and on the investigators who tend to work on these topics.

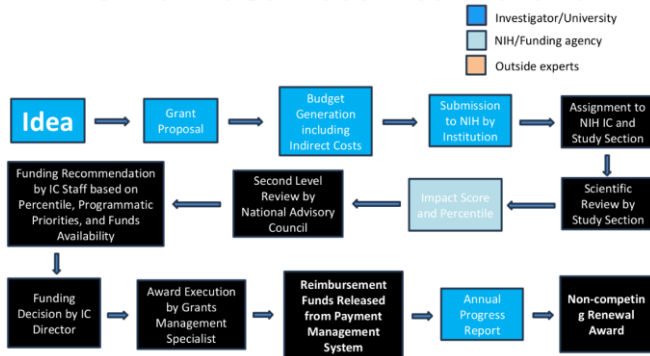
Other grants were delayed with vague requirements for removal of 'problematic' research and terminology.

The dark boxes below are where the Trump administration altered or blocked the 'normal' process:

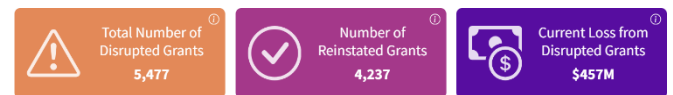
## How an Idea Becomes a Grant



## How an Idea Becomes a Grant



Grant-Witness.US is a website that was created to make visible what was happening in the NIH grant funding world by organizing publicly available information and crowd-sourced grant



5477 grants disrupted, 4237 grants reinstated, \$457M loss from disrupted grants. *Source: Grant-witness.us/nih-data.html 4/29/2026*

status data.

Investigators changed the titles of more than 700 grants to get or reinstate their funding. This



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went unfunded, while NIH became more risk averse.

Berg became very concerned about these unusual patterns in the NIH grant funding decision timing. The NIH had a new director, Jay Bhattacharya, who was also new to the NIH. Berg understands first-hand how challenging it is to come from the outside world and be an effective leader within NIH.

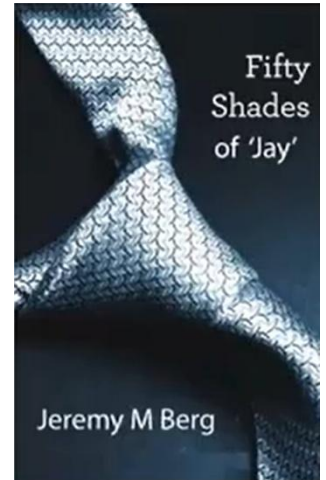
[At this point Jeremy noted that Bhattacharya is an M.D./Ph.D. economist from Stanford who had been an NIH grantee and is regarded as a 'health economist'. Berg noted that Bhattacharya's Ph.D. thesis was on earning potential as a function of medical specialty (not focused, say, on healthcare quality vs. efficiency, or patient experience, or outcomes), although Bhattacharya has done other work since then which is more focused on patients.]

Berg contacted NIH director Jay Bhattacharya in good faith to share his funding delay analyses and offer advice and support. Berg could relate to being on a very steep and long learning curve ("drinking from a fire hose") when first becoming a leader at NIH.

Bhattacharya's response to Jeremy's concerns was "breathtaking":

*Jeremy,  
I received your letter and analysis. Contrary to the assertion you make in the letter, my job is to make sure that the NIH spends the money that the American people have entrusted us with on projects that advance the health and longevity of the American people. Spending on ideological boondoggles and on dangerous research, the conduct of which risks causing a pandemic for instance, does not advance those goals. I'm committed to making sure funds allocated to the NIH are spent wisely. Thank you for your input.  
All the best,  
Jay*

Jeremy continued to communicate with Bhattacharya on several issues and concerns (some of Berg's emails were pointed, others, admittedly, a bit snarky), until it reached a point where he received no further responses from Bhattacharya. Jeremy began posting the correspondence on his GitHub site and eventually collected the trove into a pdf entitled, *Fifty Shades of Jay*.



Berg then shared what actions have been and are being taken to push back. These include analyzing and sharing the data, as we've shown.

Litigation has also been pursued vigorously, and the scientific community has won every lawsuit they've filed; then lost on appeal. Berg was personally involved in the NIH grant termination lawsuit and was heartened at the ruling by Reagan-appointed Judge William Young, who ruled in his conclusion. "The Public Officials in their haste to appease the Executive, simply moved too fast and broke things, including the law."

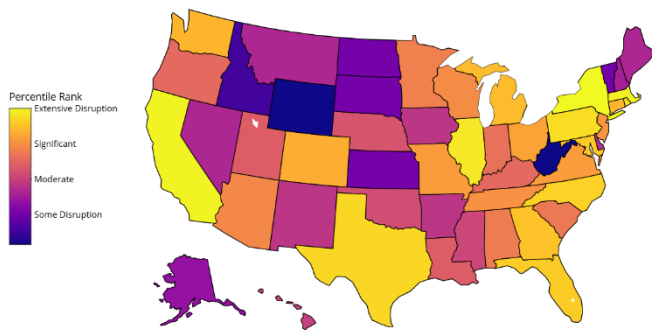
This ruling was appealed to the Supreme Court who, in effect, agreed 5-4 that NIH probably did break the law but that the grant termination lawsuit should have been brought forward as a contract violation vs. an administrative procedure violation, so the order to reinstate the grants was voided by the Supreme Court. Despite this ruling, many of the grants were reinstated.

Congress has been supportive. The Presidential budget proposal for FY2026 included a 40% cut to NIH. Instead both the House and the Senate supported a small increase (<1%) for the NIH. Both red states and blue states benefit from NIH

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grants, so there is broad congressional support for not cutting the NIH budget.

The Bethesda Declaration was published in June 2025 with more than 200 NIH employee signatures, identifying actions within the NIH that the employees considered illegal, immoral



State Impact of NIH Disrupted Grants.  
Source: *Grant-Witness.US*, 5/1/26

or misaligned with NIH mission. Berg states, “An act of incredible courage.”

This inspired groups within other agencies: NASA wrote the Voyager Declaration, FEMA wrote the Katrina Declaration, EPA and NSF both wrote declarations as well.

Stand Up For Science was created in February 2025 and quickly organized rallies around the country for the public to demonstrate their support for science and scientific research. This organization was founded by Colette Delawalla, a graduate student at Emory University. Jeremy Berg is now on its Science Advisory Board.

### Stand Up for Science Rallies

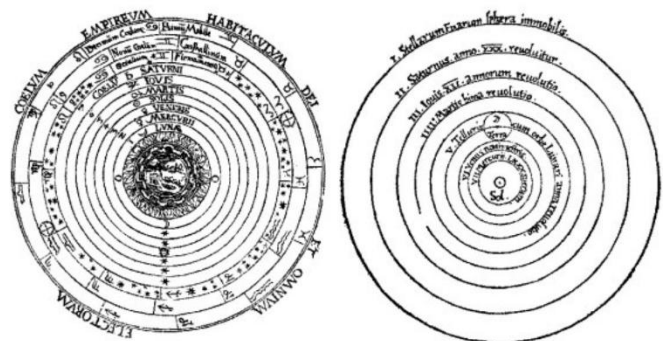


<https://www.standupforscience.net>

Berg then shared his view on why all of this is happening. His conclusion, after extensive thought and deliberation is that, as spelled out in Project 2025, efforts are underway to replace our liberal democracy with a more authoritarian form of government. Scientific knowledge is a threat to authoritarian control of information, and research funding provides tremendous leverage against universities.

Some members of the scientific community disagree and think this is just normal budget squabbles that occur with shifting partisan priorities. Berg points out that the view of this as a normal partisan squabble does not lead to predictions of grant cancellations, foreign scientist visa issues, aggressive ICE actions, etc.

But, he explained, once you take on the view of a backsliding democracy with the specter of authoritarianism, it all makes sense. He compared it to how the Copernican heliocentric model neatly organized the observations we had of our skies and enabled predictions that were not possible with the Ptolemaic geocentric model of the solar system.



Using the Right Model Facilitates Better Predictions:  
Geocentric vs. Heliocentric Models of the Solar System

What to expect going forward? Berg expects more chaos, more targeted actions, and continued low success rates on grant funding due to the multi-year funding approach. He encourages us to stay informed, rely on reason, build communities, and speak up to friends, families, and others who depend on and benefit

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from scientific advancement. “There’s no reason for anybody not to care about this,” he stated.

At this point Berg took questions:

*Q: What about the National Science Foundation?*

A: He said that the situation at NSF is worse than at NIH. Staff cuts, new leader with no science background. NSF lost their headquarters in Alexandria to HUD and now resides in leased office space, their funding curves are as bad or worse than those of NIH.

*Q: Are there grants being funded that seem to be politically motivated?*

A: There have been some concerns, but the grants being funded are of good science, supported by the peer review system.

*Q: What’s the best way to make the broader public aware of the risk to them of these delays in grant funding?*

A: Jeremy is open to all ideas to involve the broader public-- sometimes what seems like a great idea falls flat and what seems like a wacky idea works out well. He reaches out to right-wing media as well as left-leaning media. Bill Nye has done a great job being vocal on these grant funding issues, and Pete Buttigieg does a great job engaging right wing media and being invited back repeatedly.

*Q: Is there a scientist brain drain happening in the U.S. due to these policies and actions?*

A: We used to be a magnet for the best young scientists from around the world to come here; now they are reluctant and feel unwelcome. Chinese nationals are going back. Some are being offered great positions with guaranteed multi-year funding. Scientists are wondering if there’s a better deal out there. The U.S. is now much easier to leave than it used to be.

*Q: What impact do you expect from AI?*

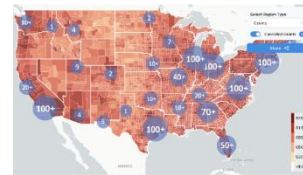
A: Potentially huge in a bad way; potentially quite big in a good way. When thinking from the perspective of the sliding democracy, the AI boom is billionaires taking over the power grid

and consolidating their power. Good things: such as A.I. transforming reading mammograms enabling radiologists to be more effective and efficient.

A British expert said AI-LLMs are not so good when they have to produce the right answer; they are very good at mimicking the style of Hemingway, for example. They are not good at being unbiased; they train on datasets that incorporate our biases and learn to perpetuate them.

Finally, if anyone who heard this talk or read this article has ideas about how to further engage the general public in the importance of these scientific grant funding issues, please contact Jeremy Berg at: [jeremymberg@gmail.com](mailto:jeremymberg@gmail.com). You can also follow him on BlueSky (@jeremymberg.bsky.social).

Other Resources: <https://grant-witness.us>  
[www.standupfor science.net/](http://www.standupfor science.net/)



[scienceimpacts.org/](http://scienceimpacts.org/)

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### **Update: Petition To Reduce Santa Barbara County Jail Expansion Plans**

By Judy Flattery

Support for the petition to add only one housing unit to the North County jail failed to convince the Board of Supervisors, who are moving forward with adding 1.5 housing units (384 beds). This is more than the petitioners wanted (256 beds) and less than Sheriff Brown wanted

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(512 beds). County staff presented the cost and benefits of reducing to one unit or expanding it to two. The main concern with reducing the expansion to only one unit was that it would put the county at risk of adding more beds in the future, or risk overcrowding, which requires more staff. The issue with expanding to two units was the cost.

It seems that establishing a parallel process of expanding diversion pathways (such as supporting a 4<sup>th</sup> County Crisis Response Team) and non-incarceration options for people arrested with mental health or substance use disorder would make the smaller expansion plan more viable [Listen to [The Fifth Branch](#) to learn about Crisis Response Teams].

### Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

*Submitted by Diane Krohn*

**May 6:** Ed Yong: *The Amazing Nature of Animal Senses*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Ed Yong](#)

**May 11, 4pm Pacific:** Meadville Lombard Theological School Virtual Event. *Separation of Church & State with Fish Stark*. Hosted by The American Humanist Association. [Separation of Church & State with Fish Stark](#)

**May 12, 7-9pm Pacific:** Samantha McGuire: *Reclaiming Democracy from White Christian Nationalism*. This is a live event in Villa Park, CA. Sponsored by the SoCal Secular Coalition. [Samantha McGuire](#)

**May 23-25:** [I Madonnari Chalk Painting Festival](#) at the Santa Barbara Mission. Come support our HSSB resident artist, Merlie Samonte, as she creates a beautiful 84"x84" chalk painting on the asphalt at the Mission celebrating the awe-inspiring wonders of science.

**May 31, 2pm:** [Eleanor at the Rubicon Theater](#) in Ventura. Rubicon website: "Candid and commanding, vulnerable and visionary, from

the shadows of the White House to the global stage, Eleanor (Roosevelt) finds her purpose at life's greatest crossroads, shaping a legacy that continues to inspire." HSSB Group Rate tickets are \$75 each.

**June 11-14:** CSICon 2026, Buffalo, NY. 50th Anniversary of the Center for Skeptical Inquiry. Speakers include Mary Roach, Bill Nye, Stuart Vyse, Benjamin Radford, Banachek, Eugenie Scott, and many others. Several HSSB Members are attending this conference. Let us know if you are going too! [CSICon 2026](#)

### HSSB Contact Information

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*Treasurer:* David Flattery,

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### Board Members at Large:

Wayne Beckman, Robert Bernstein, Judith Fontana, Gary Noreen, Mary Wilk

**To Join or Donate to HSSB:** Annual Membership dues \$36 for an individual, \$60 for a couple, \$100 for a Society Supporter and \$300 (or more) for a Society Patron. Dues payments and other donations can be made via

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- Zelle ([HSSBpayments@gmail.com](mailto:HSSBpayments@gmail.com)) or
- Checks made out to *Humanist Society of Santa Barbara* and mailed to Mary Taylor, HSSB, P.O. Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130.
- Please include your name and contact information when submitting payments.
- Membership questions? Contact Mary Taylor at [HSSB.Membership777@gmail.com](mailto:HSSB.Membership777@gmail.com)

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## HSSB Calendar

**Thursday May 14. 5:00 pm Pacific, HSSB Board Meeting.** Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

**Sunday May 17. 3:00pm Pacific. Dr. David Orenstein: *Humanity's Debt to Africa: Evolution, Humanism, and the Legacy of Eight Million Years of African Descent.*** Co-sponsored by the Freethought Society. On Zoom. <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

**Sunday May 31: HSSB Excursion to see *Eleanor*.** Rubicon Theater in Ventura. 2:00 pm

**Tuesday June 16, 5:00 pm Pacific. HSSB Board Meeting.** Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

**Sunday June 21, noon - 3:00 pm Pacific. HSSB Summer Solstice Picnic at Tuckers Grove Park.**

**Tuesday July 14. 5:00 pm Pacific. HSSB Board Meeting.** Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

**Saturday July 18, 3:00 pm Pacific. Abe Bonowitz: *Why I Support Abolishing the Death Penalty.*** On Zoom. <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.