



# WASHline

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## President's Message

1 Editor Note: Due to unavoidable circumstances,  
1 this issue will not have a President's Message.

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4 Heatherly Hodges has been working hard  
6 on behalf of WASH. The reader can expect to be  
7 pleased with her report in our next issue.

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## Editor's Corner

8  
9 by Don Wharton

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13 I feel extremely positive about WASH and  
14 where we are going as an organization. I expected  
17 our President to be able to share reasons for that in  
17 her next President's Message.

Mike Reid is out of town with Heatherly Hodges. That means that this issue did not have his excellent editorial assistance. Please, forgive the problems that would have been caught if his help was included.

Mike Reid did submit a very delightful look at three sayings that are very appropriate for our times. He takes his skeptical stance to look at where these sayings originated and how they apply in the here and now. Mike did not include a request for WASH members to join his Maryland lobbying team with this issue. However, if you are concerned about Maryland legislation please consider joining his team this next year.

I recently read the book *The Violent Take it By Force*, by Mathew Taylor. It was recommended by Jared Huffman as he accepted his AHA award at its last convention. While it is a good book, Jeff Bloom gives us a review that strongly suggests a better one for those who are interested in Christian nationalism. Jeff reviewed *The Power Worshipers*, authored by Katherine Stewart. I will look forward to reading this one myself. It will do a much better job in covering the nuances of how Christian nationalists are working to take power and make

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## Gratitude

The entire WASH community conveys our gratitude to those who renewed their membership, signed up as a new member or just made a contribution because you appreciate the service our community is providing. Thank you.

Please go to <https://wash.org/donate/>  
If you have not already joined.

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The views expressed should in all cases be considered those of the author unless explicitly endorsed by the WASH Board of Directors.

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life miserable for anyone who does not agree with their agenda. Thank you, Jeff.

My friend, Robert Ahrens, hosted my atheist meetings in his Rockville home for years before moving to the west coast so he could be around his grandchildren. I am so glad that we stayed in touch and that he retains his affection for our DC region atheist community. The single most traumatic projection of the next administration is the promised deportation of 20 million people. Robert gives us his insights about what this means. Next month he will share what he says we should do about it.

Aiden Barnes is our very valued American Atheist State Director for Virginia. He is fighting the good fight in the state in our region most at risk for the worst that might happen. He outlines his vision going forward and asks for people to join his team fighting against the madness. His team is doing awesome work. If you are in Virginia please consider joining him.

I had no climate or AI article in our last newsletter. I promised to bring them back with this one. Both have news which should blow anyone's mind if they did not see them coming.

I was distressed at how many people were feeling collective guilt over the 2024 election. I addressed that issue in my December chapter meeting. I expanded on that a bit for this issue of our newsletter. Yes, we need to do what we can to push back against the madness. However, if you look at the details, the forces of illusion and disinformation have the resources and tools to overwhelm anything that we might do. Yes, we need to fight the good fight, but let us not blame ourselves if we are outgunned in that fight.

I wrote an article after our picnic last summer on Black Nones. I had hoped to refine that piece further but it is what it is. We can be both pleased and a bit disappointed at the situation that our black friends must deal with within their community. You can read about those nuances in my article.

Our many chapters are doing wonderful things to create community and help where we can. Please look at our chapter report and join in where it makes sense for you to do so. I am especially pleased with the charity work of our chapters. My chapter very much supports Atheist Helping the



See website [Atheists Helping the Homeless](http://Atheists Helping the Homeless) to volunteer or contribute.

## Beautiful Misattributions

By Mike Reid

In America today the separation of church and state is under attack, science and intellectualism are rejected, authoritarianism is on the rise, and incurious ignorance is celebrated. Swimming within the gloom that inundates me when I contemplate all of this are three prescient quotes that we often see floating around the Internet:

1. *When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross.* – “Sinclair Lewis”
2. *The people know that the gods are real, the philosophers that they are false, and the politicians that they are useful.* – “Seneca”
3. *Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence comes evil?* – “Epicurus”

These three quotes seemingly from eminent intellectuals of the past are elegant, concise, and *apropos* of our time and place. They are also spurious.

The first quote is usually attributed to the Twentieth Century Nobel Prize winning American

author Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951). Supposedly, he was commenting on the rise of fascism and authoritarianism in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s and warning that it could happen in America too. Here it would take on a Christian nationalist flavor. There was indeed a fascist movement in the USA at the time that was loosely allied with those in Europe. Fortunately, its followers never gained power here and the movement lost nearly all support when the country entered World War II. Lewis' worries about fascism appear in his 1935 novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, but the quote does not. Although this sounds like something Lewis might have said, according to the Sinclair Lewis Society at Illinois State University, which supports scholarship on his works, the quote does not appear in any of his known writings and there is no record of him ever having said it. It's a beautiful misattribution.

The second quote pops up around the Internet in various forms and is often attributed to the Roman philosopher and statesman Seneca (c. 4 BCE - 65 CE) or sometimes to other famous Romans. There is a similar quote, which is probably the basis for it, but it comes from eighteenth century England, not ancient Rome. The actual quote is "*The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful.*" Its author was the English historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) and it appears in his massive, multi-volume tome, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) (chapter II, part 10). It's a real quote, but it does not come from the time or place that most people think.

The third quote is usually attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (c. 341 BCE - c. 270 BCE). Unfortunately, this too is likely incorrect. Very little of Epicurus' original work survives and this quote appears in none of it. The Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume (1711-1776) provides the first known occurrence of this quote in his posthumously published book, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779) (part 10), but curiously cites no primary source for it.

The Roman Christian theologian Lactantius (c. 250 - c. 325 CE) provides the earliest known discussion of this Epicurean bit of wisdom in his Latin treatise *De ira Dei (On the Anger of God)*

(313 CE). The quote itself does not appear in the work, but over several chapters he more or less ascribes such views to Epicurus as he criticizes the earlier philosopher's supposed skepticism about the nature of God. Reading *On the Anger of God*, I can imagine how someone might have cobbled the quote together from Lactantius' multiple critiques of Epicurus scattered over several chapters. Unfortunately, like later writers, he provides no direct citations. Lactantius was a writer from classical antiquity, but he was not contemporary with Epicurus. In fact he lived more than five centuries later! It's possible that Lactantius knew of now lost primary sources for Epicurus' commentaries on religion, but he makes no mention of any in his surviving works. Given the absence of any primary source for this quote, we cannot trust it.

These quotes speak to me. They started as incisive bits of wisdom from unknown authors that evolved over decades or centuries into the forms that we now know them. The people to whom they are traditionally attributed probably never said them, but does it really matter?

One could hardly find a better or more eloquent one-sentence description of the frightening political situation in the USA today than that contained in the Lewis non-quote about fascism coming to America "wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross." Although, associated with a different period in history, this sentence feels to me as if it were written for the here and now. It's chillingly spot on for today.

The Gibbon quote about the role of religion in ancient Rome could easily describe the misuse of religion by con artists and demagogues today. Since the beginning of civilization, demagogues and authoritarians have known that religion can be a highly effective tool for manipulating a gullible and unsophisticated public. This is as true today as it was in antiquity.

The final one about the contradictory nature of God focuses on a question that has perplexed theologians for centuries. Modern philosophers and theologians associate it with the so-called Epicurean Paradox even though its connection to Epicurus is dubious. Skeptics such as myself look at the Epicurean Paradox and wonder how any thinking person would want to worship that god. Nevertheless, religious conservatives today in America and elsewhere are somehow able to



rationalize the contradictions. One can only hope that enough people today heed the prophetic wisdom given in these elegant quotes, spurious as they are.

*Mike Reid is a former president of WASH.*

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## The Power Worshippers

A book by Katherine Stewart

Reviewed by: Jeff Bloom

Katherine Stewart has been investigating and writing about the nexus between religion and politics in the USA for over ten years. Nobody today writes with more knowledge and insight about the Christian nationalist movement in the United States and its impact. *The Power Worshippers* is the best general description and explanation of the Christian nationalist movement that I have read.

The first chapter of *The Power Worshippers* introduces us to Christian nationalism by describing Stewart's personal experience attending Christian nationalist events in North Carolina in 2018. Stewart describes attending a "Pastors Briefing" at a church. The Pastors Briefing is organized by the Watchmen Network sponsored by the Family Research Council and other organizations to "shape public policy and informed civic activism" by members of the clergy and their congregants. Even though IRS regulations prohibit partisan politicking from the church pulpit, the website of the event and the speakers at the event unabashedly endorse candidates. The underlying point of the entire event is that Christians need to vote and to vote for "biblical values."

Stewart describes "Cultural Impact Teams" formed to aid pastors in organizing congregants to influence government at all levels and to promote "biblical values," often through the use of videos and other materials. The first chapter goes on to describe the role of a wealthy Christian benefactor funding all of this activity, and the use of well-known celebrities in far-right Christian circles to spread the message at events. "Values buses" travel the USA promoting these messages, often with these celebrities in tow, including the message of "Seven Mountain" dominionism - the idea that Christians should control all aspects of civic life in the USA.

In Chapter 2, Stewart describes how Christian nationalism organizes to maximize the movement's influence in the halls of power. Here she makes an important point about the current goals of the enterprise: the movement has often become focused on the goals of the people who fund all of its activities. To demonstrate how this works, Stewart describes a fundraiser for Capitol Ministries that she attends in Tulare, California at which people pay up to \$10,000 per plate to mingle with agri-business leaders and others who are dedicated to promoting the Christian nationalist agenda in the state. Stewart describes the connection between Capitol Ministries, the Family Policy Alliance, and The Master's Seminary in Los Angeles, which is led by John MacArthur, a Calvinist who adheres to an extreme, patriarchal brand of religion that teaches that women should stay at home and "submit" to men.

One of the speakers at the Tulare event, Ralph Drollinger, promotes MacArthur's ideas in the California legislature. He founded Capitol Ministries to promote those ideas across the USA – and Ministries bible study sessions are now held weekly in the U.S. Capitol and in many states. During the Trump administration they were also held in the White House. The non-partisan, secretive organization known as "The Family" has extended these study sessions to government bodies around the world, as well as in the UN, and several U.S. agencies. Capitol Ministries preaches adherence to a host of far-right policy positions on LGBTQ rights, environmental policy, fiscal policy, regulation of business, and other topics.

Chapter 3 addresses the efforts of Christian nationalists to ban abortion rights. Stewart describes her own personal experience in being close to death after being denied an abortion necessary to save her life at a Catholic hospital. Here she also makes the important point that Christian nationalism did not arise from a desire to protect human life. It came about instead from a purposeful strategy to gain political power by dividing the country's population. Stewart describes attending the March For Life, in Washington, D.C., and establishes that few of the young marchers are aware that protestants did not as a group object to abortion rights 50 years ago.

Stewart describes in some detail the history of the Christian right since the 1960's and mentions the influence of Paul Weyrich and others who sought to

tear down the government and replace it with a system that no longer included a vote or even political rights for every citizen. She also explains Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" to turn southern whites against the Democratic Party, using race as a divider. Weyrich added religion to that strategy, to change the role of religion in the country from support of social justice issues in the civil rights movement to conservative goals. She describes the founding of The Council For National Policy, the American Legislative Exchange Council, and other organizations furthering the cause. Stewart outlines the sources of funding for all of these organizations, including some of the wealthiest families in the USA. In 1979, the movement coalesced around a desire to defeat the re-election of Jimmy Carter, and abortion was a helpful issue for that purpose. Other organized efforts to promote illiberal and religious policy arose later that added to these efforts – including The Christian Coalition and the Faith and Freedom Coalition - and they are described in detail by Stewart.

In Chapter 4, Stewart describes how the nationalists have focused recently on gaining support among racial minorities and harnessing their power at the ballot box. This chapter also discusses the recent focus on anti-LGBTQ legislation and how groups such as Church United have organized to influence policy by connecting churches and their congregants. All of these efforts promote the message that separation of religion and government is contrary to religious freedom and not intended by the authors of the first amendment.

Chapter 5 details the ideological and literary origins of Christian nationalism. Stewart describes the enormous influence on the movement of the ideas promoted by Rousas Rushdoony and his Christian Reconstructionist predecessors. The bottom line for Rushdoony and his admirers is that civil order should be rooted in Christianity and hierarchy – not freedom of religion and equal rights for all. Stewart here describes the influence of pseudo-historian David Barton in recent years, who promotes false information about American history and the intentions of the constitution's framers in order to justify the application of religious doctrine to civic laws and institutions. She points out the irony that Christian nationalists have now turned the origins of their movement upside-down in order to claim they seek to preserve freedom and that such freedom requires that public policy promoting equal rights and opportunity be replaced with

theocracy. The fusion of Calvinist ideology with capitalist ideology has brought wealthy elites into the religious fold and made possible the nationalist movement of today, Stewart argues.

In Chapter 6, Stewart explains how the Christian nationalist movement has conveniently re-written history to further its causes. She describes the Museum of the Bible and the family that built it. She also describes how David Barton uses disinformation about history to justify the widely-believed notion in nationalist circles that the "removal" of the bible and Christianity from public schools brought about an array of social ills in the USA. Barton's Wall-Builders organization and his American Renewal Project are presented as illustrative of the tactics that have been used to promote this fiction, among others.

Chapter 7 describes the efforts by Christian nationalists to promote theocratic public policy at all levels of government. Stewart explains how Project Blitz and its later progeny seek to extend nationalist policies and dominionism in every state capital and even in municipal governments. The strategy Stewart describes for doing this is based on the subterfuge of promoting the proposed legislation as promoting history and civil rights – not religion. For this reason, opposition to "In God We Trust" bills is portrayed as "anti-faith." The second stage of the strategy for advancing theocracy is injecting nationalist policy directly into schools and government more overtly. The third step in the process is to legalize discrimination against any policies and individuals that offend the sensibilities of Christian nationalists, such as the new laws limiting information provided by medical professions regarding reproductive rights and the many religious liberty laws allowing discrimination in the name of religious freedom.

Chapter 8 outlines the nationalist movement's embrace of data analysis to give them a huge advantage in targeting voters in political campaigns and in outreach for policy change. Chapter 9 details the vast effort of the movement to privatize public education, through voucher schemes and charter schools. Chapter 10 describes the decades-long effort, led by several wealthy individuals and families, to capture the federal court system with the purpose of establishing religion as policy, and specific religious doctrines and beliefs, in the guise of religious liberty.

Chapter 11 is an insightful look at how Christian nationalists and Christian institutions in the USA have restricted health care and health care rights for all citizens, without regard to their religious beliefs or affiliations. The pervasive influence of the Catholic Church is highlighted, with revelations such as the purchase agreements for hospitals sold by the Church that retain the so-called moral and ethical rules of Church hospitals even after the hospitals are no longer owned by the Church or any of its affiliated institutions. Chapter 12 describes the global outreach efforts of Christian nationalists and the huge influence of the movement's leaders in the USA in many countries around the globe.

In summary, Stewart has masterfully distilled a very complex religious and political movement into a cogent and very readable summary that even someone with no background in the subject can understand. Her writing style is engaging, as she breaks up the necessary expositions of history, philosophy and religious doctrine with personal anecdotes about her experience attending various nationalist events and talking to the people involved. I recommend *The Power Worshippers*, and I also suggest that you look for Stewart's new book, to be available in February, 2025: *Money, Lies, and God: Inside The Movement To Destroy American Democracy*.

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## Deporting 20 Million "Illegals"

by Robert Ahrens

Trump has promised during his campaign to deport the 20 million or so illegals the GOP claims came over the southern border. There are a few things to note about this.

First, that's an estimate. Of course, it's also based on the fact that a majority of those illegals didn't come in over the southern border illegally, but they can in legally, with a visa. So, we've got a rough idea from that. But just a rough one. Second, that's not new. We've had this many illegals here in those numbers for roughly 50 years, since Reagan's day. Between then and now, the GOP has had several opportunities to "fix" that problem, as they had complete control over the government a lot more than just once. But did they?

No. In fact, just last year, the GOP and the

Democrats negotiated a bill that would have done a lot - and in fact would have given the GOP everything they wanted for the border - but Trump forced Johnson to kill it. ut there's still Trump's promise he made - because he wanted to run on this (and that's why he killed that bill) - that he would deport all those illegal aliens!

OK then, let's set the stage. First, the United States has 337,575,200+ (and counting) people, according to the population clock on the census.gov site, spread over a fifty state area. There are 350 cities in the US with a population of over 100,000. The largest is New York City, with 8,097,282, roughly. So to say the Federal government is going to deport 20 million illegal aliens, that's a number equal to approximately 2.5 times the population of New York City spread over all 50 states.

The government services devoted to immigration are three separate entities:

- United States Citizenship and Immigration Services - approximately 19,000 employees.
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement - approximately 20,000 employees
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection - approximately 58,000 employees.

Where, pray tell, are the folks available to actually search and capture illegal aliens INSIDE the United States? Because two of those three are about the border, not inside enforcement. That's ICE. With what, 10,300 employees? Hmm, that means that in four years, those 10,300 employees will need to capture and arrange for the deportation of 2,000 illegal aliens each. That works out to just over two aliens per workday. Those employees are assigned to the Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Branch. But before you catch any, you have to find them. So, just starting out, the Feds don't truly have the resources to manage this. So, how would it get done? Trump says he'll enlist the military.

Uh huh, sure. Untrained, to begin with in what it takes to do this, and there IS a national law restricting the use of the military inside the country from enforcing civilian law. That takes a national emergency to circumvent. I guarantee that someone will stand up and file a lawsuit to stop that.

But, for the sake of argument, let's say he

wins, and the military is being led by some MAGA officer. So, what do they have to do in order to deport 20 million illegal aliens? Organize. I'm no expert at organizing military resources, but a big part of that is trying to work with the ICE folks to find out where to focus their efforts.

Then decide how to do the search. Door to door? Given the lack of training for US Army troops as ICE agents, that's probably the way to go, even though ICE said decades ago they'd not ever do that. But wait, there's another problem. Identifying the illegals. That's not gonna be easy, and that's going to be a hard hurdle to overcome. Why? Because a bunch of them are going to be hidden in Hispanic communities, because, News fash! They're Hispanic! Brown-skinned aliens, as Trump has noted more than once. But that's a hard one, because most of them are as poor as the aliens, and those citizenship papers aren't free.

So, what's the military going to do? Just round up all the brown-skinned folks? Given the lack of "give-a-damn" attitude from Trump, maybe that's exactly what they'll do! So, let's assume for the sake of argument the US Army manages to round up, say five million "illegals" in the first year. I think that's too high, but what the hay, this is a mental exercise, isn't it? They'll have to park them someplace until they can be sorted out by country of origin. Now, maybe that's easy for the visa overstayers, since we do have their names from the visas. The illegals who came in over the border will be harder. Many of them may have no ID at all. Poor folk, remember? IDs cost money, even in foreign countries. But there's no guarantee any of them will cooperate, including the US citizens in those groups. US citizens who have no citizenship papers or even IDs, remember. How do they get sorted? Randomly? By accent? Sure as hell, the GOP folks in charge of this don't, nor do they care.

On to the deportation. Usually, that happens via aircraft, but for five million people in a year? Expensive! So, let's use boats, let's make it easy and say it's cheaper. So, that first boat goes to a Central American country, say, Honduras with about 1,500 illegals. It arrives at their port, and right away their border folks get involved. The ICE folks on the boat explain the US is deporting all the folks on this boat. After some back and forth and such, the Honduran agents start working with the ICE guys to identify the arrivals. But there's a problem. Let's say, 20% of those "illegals" aren't

Hondurans! Some claim to the Honduran agents that they're really Americans! So, what happens?

Those folks go back to the US. Why? Because in a deportation, it takes two entities - the governments of each country - the deporting country and the receiving country. And I guarantee you, the deportee has to be a citizen of the receiving country. In fact, the receiving country could refuse to take some of those, and claim that they were expelled and cannot return!

What then happens to those people upon their return to the US? They could be jailed for being an illegal, but that's a misdemeanor, not a felony. So, yes, they could detain them in, say, camps, but that's going to encounter lawsuits at some point.

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## Virginia Call to Action

by Aiden Barnes

Comrades, our nation is facing a devastating setback for the next four years, as the incoming administration will bring an unrelenting assault on our fundamental freedoms. He has vowed to do even more damage in his second term than his first. This is a personal blow for so many of us, particularly millions of vulnerable Americans who are terrified right now. Our work for reproductive rights, racial justice, a livable planet, human dignity, and maintaining the wall of separation between church and state just got even harder.

Despite how it may feel in this moment, we are not powerless. Our voices still matter. Our activism can still change lives. Fighting the Trump administration will not be easy, but we've done it before and we will do it again. The humanist movement has always stood for justice, equality, and a future shaped by empathy and reason. This is our legacy, and we won't let them take it away. Our allies at American Atheists, the American Humanist Association, the Secular Coalition for America, the Union of Concerned Scientists and others, have long understood the possibility of a second Trump term, and they've been preparing. As we gear up to fight in every way we can, I'm personally calling on all members of WASH to be part of that effort. We need to recommit ourselves to standing up for our shared values in big ways



and small, in our neighborhoods, our workplaces, and our communities. Every bit helps.

## Climate Update

by Don Wharton

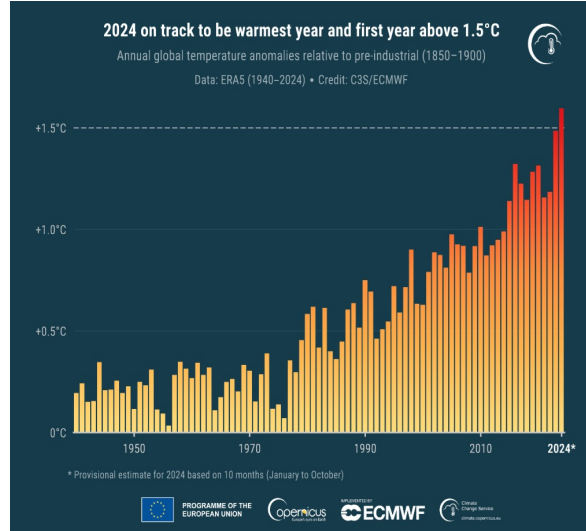
There's not a moment to lose. We must harness our fears, our grief, and yes, our anger, to resist the dangerous policies Trump and his allies will unleash on us. We need to mobilize our community to resist Christo-fascism through rapid response, direct action, and in the courts. We will accomplish this through organized action, support for our allies, and unwavering solidarity. Let's stay connected. Let's stay strong and steel ourselves for the fight ahead. It will demand a fearless spirit, an informed mind, critical analysis, and sustained resistance. We face the enactment of Project 2025, a far-right supreme court, political authoritarianism, increasing inequality and record homelessness, a looming climate crisis, and conflicts abroad.

Our nation has faced periods of remarkable turmoil in its 250-year history, and this is certainly one of them. As we face the uncertain days ahead, I draw strength from the knowledge that in so many dark moments, millions of Americans have picked themselves up and joined together to resist injustice and work to protect the most vulnerable among us. Now it falls on us to do the same.

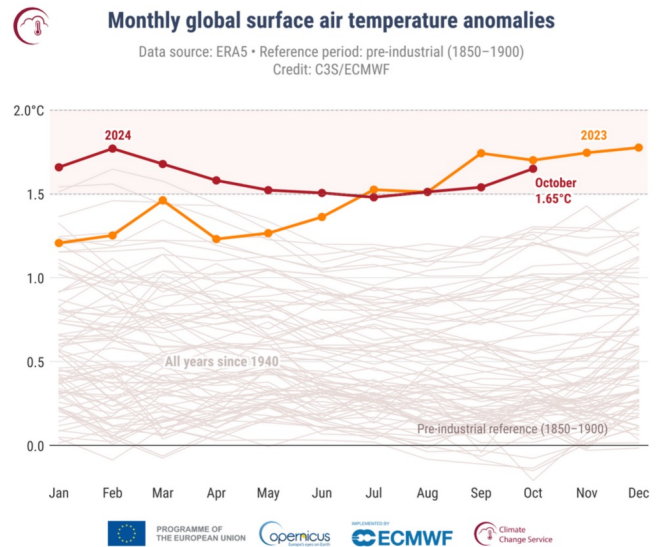
The day is dark, the forces arrayed are tenacious, yet despite this disappointing outcome we will always fight for our families, our freedoms, and a brighter future for our community. We will always demand accountability and transparency for our community from our political leaders. We will always remain in solidarity. Nothing will stop us from caring for our community. United and unwavering in our collective strength, we are NOT backing down!

Among the first steps you can take is to join our Secular Advocacy Team, or volunteer as an Assistant State Director for American Atheists, or simply organize social events to keep our community actively connected to one another. Feel free to reach out to me directly via email at [abarnes@atheists.org](mailto:abarnes@atheists.org) for more info or any help you might need getting started.

2024 will be the hottest year ever. The C3S, Copernicus Climate Change Service, has declared 2024 [virtually certain to be the warmest year and first year above 1.5°C](#).



This shows the yearly trend and the following shows the monthly values:



We had the second warmest November ever at 1.62°C above pre-industrial levels.

There is still no end to annual increases in carbon dioxide emissions. 2023 had 40.6 billion tonnes of CO2 added to the atmosphere. In 2024 that was increased to 41.6 billion tonnes.

Hurricane Berle was the earliest forming cat 5 hurricane ever. It formed on June 28 was a cat 4 on July 1 and a 165 mph cat5 on July 2. Hurricane Helene, a cat 4, created over \$55 billion of damages in North Carolina alone. Milton [hit cat 5](#)



[winds](#) in 24 hours due to a very warm Gulf of Mexico. Cuba was hit by multiple hurricanes practically wiping out its electrical grid system.

Roswell, New Mexico got a half year of rain in a day. Valencia, Spain got a year of rain in 8 hours. We had east coast fires this year from a dramatic drought, primarily in New York and New Jersey. Our Washington DC region got a new record 38 days without detectable rain. The new record was first set in a three day period of all time high temperatures for DC and vicinity.

The World Wildlife Fund has a new [Living Planet Report](#) reviewing wildlife population trends. From its Executive Summary, “Over the past 50 years (1970-2020), the average size of monitored wildlife populations has shrunk by 73%, as measured by the Living Planet Index (LPI). This is based on almost 35,000 population trends and 5,495 species of amphibians, birds, fish, mammals and reptiles. Freshwater populations have suffered the heaviest declines, falling by 85%, followed by terrestrial (69%) and marine populations (56%).”

NOAA has a new 2024 Arctic Report Card with an important section on [Terrestrial Carbon Cycling](#). It reports that the Arctic just moved into becoming a net source of carbon dioxide emissions. It has been a consistent source of methane. They monitor permafrost at 15m depth and “Permafrost temperatures in 2024 were the highest on record at 9 of 20 long-term monitoring sites across Alaska.” Wildfires have radically increased as a source of emissions and, “2024 was the second highest year for wildfire emissions north of the Arctic Circle.” All 18 of the lowest Arctic sea ice September readings have occurred in the last 18 years. And quote, “In recent years, minimum extents are ~50% of the values in the 1980s.” Low sea ice means more open ocean, which is darker and more absorbing of heat from the sun.

The Arctic permafrost has carbon deposits that are double all carbon released by humans to date. Much of what goes into the atmosphere will be methane that is 90 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Methane has a half life in the atmosphere such that the net effect is roughly 23 times for the following century.

Michael Mann in his [Our Fragile Moment: How Lessons from Earth's Past Can Help Us Survive the Climate Crisis](#) has this quote in it: “We're not yet past the point of no return for the

collapse of the Greenland Ice Sheet. But we're probably getting perilously close, as we likely are with at least the marine portion of the Western Antarctic Ice Sheet. Together, that's enough ice loss to give us thirty or more feet of sea level rise, enough to displace hundreds of millions of people. How soon this will happen remains uncertain. But ... recent research has led to a substantial upward revision in the likelihood of catastrophic sea level rise this century, absent substantial climate action.”

The IPCC has not included anything like this as a probable prediction for this century. However, a [climate.gov article](#) says, “the last time atmospheric carbon dioxide amounts were this high was roughly 3 million years ago, during the Mid-Pliocene Warm Period, when global surface temperature was 4.5–7.2 degrees Fahrenheit (2.5–4 degrees Celsius) warmer than during the pre-industrial era. Sea level was at least 16 feet higher than it was in 1900 and possibly as much as 82 feet higher.”

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## AI Update

By Don Wharton

My son is a physician. He is raving about the quality of an AI system that helps him produce patient notes. His estimate is that he is saving one hour per day.

AI will radically change all aspects of human existence. We are now seeing just a few of the leading edges of the revolutions to come. I listened to an NPR show highlighting how many advertising agencies are seeing their marketplace collapse. It is easy to create professional quality material in-house with generative AI systems. The only ad agencies that are surviving are those who are already making heavy use of AI. [Botto, an AI artist](#) has sold roughly 150 images for \$5 million since 2021.

People were astonished by Sora, a video clip generating system with excellent realism. Sora has now been released with not great reviews. Videocraft is offering the Sora capabilities [here](#). There is a broad range of other systems with increasingly excellent capabilities. The Google deepmind group has released their [Veo 2 system](#). I think many of you would also find [Kling.AI](#) to be most impressive. [LTX studio](#) claims to produce

videos from storyboard to finished product.

Many of these systems can convert any photo into a video. I expect that we will shortly have the ability to create feature length movies of big budget quality by people working in their home with AI software. It is only a question of time for the video controls and capabilities to fall into place. Of course, porn will be a major fraction of what these systems will be asked to produce. There currently are many women making six figure annual incomes on Only Fans. Many do this by selling erotically interesting interactions. AI systems are already moving into this market. Perhaps not surprisingly, some people are developing real feelings for their AI assistants. Some vendors are explicitly marketing their AIs as personal friends and on occasion including romance as a possibility. Can this world become more strange? Yes it can. And with increasing speed.

There are massive increases in the abilities of AI systems to act as agents. These changes include expansions in the range and sizes of formats that can be processed, the multi-modal mix of information that can be simultaneously processed, and the range of actions, function calls, and output formats that can be generated. Of course, they are substantially expanding the range of human languages that can be processed for input or output.

One example is the new Google product [Gemini Advanced](#). It has a Deep Research function designed to emulate what a personal researcher might do if he or she were part of your paid staff. There are many other efforts to create agents to vastly expand the efficiency of knowledge workers of all forms.

60 minutes had a segment on Khan Academy's [AI tutor Khanmigo](#). This could revolutionize education if it really could relate to students with minimal teacher intervention. See the [Khanmigo.ai web page](#) for more. Arizona will shortly be getting a charter school taught by an AI system. The [Unbound system](#) will make use of Khan Academy and IXL systems.

I differ a bit with my friend, Gary Berg-Cross. He is a high end AI expert who has suggested that we are unlikely to have full human level general intelligence for years. My impression is that the ferocity of effort is incredibly impressive

and we are likely to actually have a greater than human intelligence sooner than Gary might expect. I will be presenting recent data suggesting that we might already have such results. I would encourage the reader to adopt the skepticism that Gary would bring to these results. I previously shared how Chat GPT4 passed the bar exam test at a higher level than average lawyers. It turned out that it had been trained on information that was specific to those tests. So skepticism is warranted.

Recent high end AI performance results are due to a "chain of reasoning" methodology. The AI system is forced to visibly break down its reasoning into visible steps. This is a vast improvement over the past where AI systems were black boxes providing little insight about how or why a given result was produced. Chat GPT o1 was a newly released chain of reasoning system with impressive performance. There were a number of competing systems that were likewise impressive. However, the most starkly impressive results were claimed by a not yet released Open AI o3 system, [a video of the announcement](#). There are three levels of compute for o3-mini and an o3 system without the mini label. Open AI says that they want to do further safety testing before some versions might be released in January.

The most challenging general AI intelligence test is said to be the ARC-AGI-1. The o3 system with 16 hours of processing time scored 87.5% on this test with 75% deemed to represent human level intelligence. It has a 75.5% score with the more modest low o3-mini version. I recall that the next highest prior LLM score on this test was 53%. The ARC test people are working on a second updated version of their test. The Open AI graph included below shows the relative performance of o1 systems in red and o3 systems in blue.



There are competitive tests of program coding skills. The o3 system scored 2727 on this

with a 2400 score being better than 99.2% of all programmers. This system beat the best scores for the Open AI people announcing this system. Computer programming is a major skilled category of computer work. Past systems have been helpful, but none could reliably code programs on their own.

The o3 system scored 87.7% on a PhD level science test with 70% being the average score for real human science doctorate holders. It scored 25% on an Epoch AI math benchmark test with the next highest score being only 2%.

Jeremy Berman got a [53.6% score on the ARC-AGI-1 test using Sonnet 3.5](#). His story about how he did this includes an in depth analysis of the ARC testing system.

The Department of Energy has a [report on data center electricity usage](#). Data centers consumed 4.4% of total U.S. electricity in 2023 and are expected to consume as much as 12% of total electricity demand by 2028. In 2014, data centers used 58 terawatt hours (TWh) of electricity; in 2023, they used 176 TWh and in 2028, they are expected to use as much as 580 Twh. This demand might counterbalance much of the excellent work in moving our country toward renewable energy.

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## We Did Not "let" This Happen

by Don Wharton

I included the following paragraph in my December meeting announcement:

We did not "let" this happen. The Supreme Court opened the political process to the highest bidder. An alliance between obscene wealth and religious fundamentalism stepped forward to buy what was open for them to buy with that bidding. A major additional factor was the buying of media assets and a focus on hate and fear mongering that demonized science based thinking and sanewashed the insane right-wing autocrats that they wanted to put in power. The conspiracy to make this happen is well out in the open. Elon Musk by himself put about \$190 million into this election process. Analysts suggest that the total committed across all levels of elections this cycle was a record of about \$16 billion. This does not count the uncountable billions of prior investments in anti-scientific institutions and media systems promoting right

wing propaganda to the excessively gullible. It also did not count the hundreds of millions in free advertising provided from mainstream media as it differentially covered the pronouncements and aspirations of the lunatic autocratic right. Sane political perspectives are just not as compelling as news and get far less coverage.

I modestly expanded on this during our meeting and will further expand here. There are many elements of obscene disconnection with reality implicit in the heavy handed pumping of disinformation into the minds of gullible. The most heavily documented is the Big Lie. This is a proper noun signifying the single biggest lie ever voiced in a political context. It was his attempt to fight against his legitimate loss. Polling on the belief in this lie showed that shortly after it was voiced as many as 80% of his party believed it. Readings for a good time tended to decrease until only a minority of Republicans actually believed the Big Lie. Mainstream media reported on the many failures to support any of the outrageous claims in a court of law. However, with Trump's decision to run again for the Presidency, the right-wing media sphere reestablished that 80% belief in the minds of self-identified Republicans. Mainstream media reporting on actual facts is powerless against the repetitions of hate and fear mongering lies from the many sources of right-wing media and the delusional bubbles of right wing social media.

The majority of Democrats know that there has been a general decline in crime over decades with a modest bump up during the Covid 19 crisis. That bump has been thoroughly erased with new lows in murder rates to be achieved this year. AH Datalytics is now producing a [real time index](#) of crime. They report 5,956 murders for the first ten months of 2024. That is down 15.6% from the 7059 reported for the same period in 2023. That projects a record year over year decline. The leader of that group claimed that 90% of Republicans thought that crime was up while only 28% of Democrats believed in that error of fact. Democrats know that new immigrants, both fully legal and the undocumented, are far more law abiding than long term Americans. Republicans believe that murder, rape and drug smuggling are characteristics of these new immigrants. Nearly 100% of drug smuggling over the southern border is done by American citizens because they are less likely to be caught. The drug cartels do not like to lose their product. The preposterous story of the eating of cats and dogs underscores just how ridiculous a lie



might be and still be accepted by the gullible.

I wrote previously on how extremely divergent the political parties are on the economy. Both parties feel that the economy is better when their party is in power. The problem is that Republicans are roughly twice as extreme in the intensity of their bias. Our country had objectively the best economy of the developed world going into this last election. However, the misinformation system made the economy the single most cited negative reason for not voting for Kamala Harris.

Similar wildly divergent “facts” exist for trans rights, the role of public schools, libraries, the party best supporting blue collar workers, the efficiency of government, gun regulation, the fair application of the rule of law, climate science, vaccines, the personhood of fetal cell masses, critical race theory, and many other issues. In all of these issues, in my opinion, scientific realism supports the progressive or liberal position.

We cannot ignore the role of the digital con-game called crypto currencies. I checked in on coinmarketcap.com and found that only 11 of the top 100 “currencies” were in the green today at 1:30pm on 12/31. These are all fantasy creations that add no productive value. Of the 10,496 such currencies tracked, most will be gone and retain no value over the longer term. However, just multiplying the current prices with the numbers outstanding results in a market cap of \$3.28 trillion according to this site. That represents a massive set of delusions. BTW, number 100 on the list of highest market cap currencies is Fartcoin (valued at \$965 million). Fartcoins are now “worth” 96 cents each.

Those trading in these delusions and motivated to defend and preserve their profits are quite wealthy. They are also quite smart and know how to select topics which could best smear any possible opponents to their vast con-game empire. Crypto-bro’s extraordinary political influence is documented in a [60 Minutes episode](#). The crypto crowd wants to remove the SEC from oversight of what they do and replace it with the CFTC. The SEC is concerned with the integrity of offerings sold into the public capital markets. The CFTC is only concerned with the functioning of the markets for what is traded. They do not investigate the intrinsic integrity of underlying objects being traded. Thus the crypto con-game get protection for a vast expansion in their fleecing of the gullible.

One of the members attending my last community meeting reported that she was scared about the future. She has a most valid right to be scared. There is a promise to deport 20 million. That would demand a vast expanse of police state activity. There is also a promise to weaponize the Department of Justice and demands that the media be “fixed.” Defamation lawsuits have become a major tool of media control in Hungary and are emerging as a threat to American media. ABC news felt that they had to pay a \$15 defamation suit that really had no merit based on existing law. However, if the pathways to power are dominated by the right-wing, they might operate on any delusional understanding of the law that they prefer. These are reasons for us to fear what might come.

The above said, Kamala Harris was almost certainly more “feared” than Trump. If the mixture of media creates delusional hatred and fears, for those people that those hatreds and fears become the truth. Reality has ceased to matter if the marketers of delusions are more effective in their game.

Those of us who value truth did not “let” the prospective disasters of the next four years come to be. That future was bought and paid for by those who wish to more vigorously extract incremental wealth from the rest of us. This is confirmed by the fact that Trump is turning his cabinet over to the misogynist billionaire class (\$13 billion+ in net worth).

The toxic lies and structural male supremacist policies has resulted in only 45% of young women without children now wanting to have children. See [Pew Research](#).

Religion is the primary marker of the gullibility and/or transactional understandings driving the acceptance of fascist policies of all forms. We can organize. We can contribute to organizations to push back against moves toward fascism. However, we should not feel guilt when the forces of ignorance make investments that exceed anything that the forces of reason can accomplish. But please put your energy and cold hard cash into this fight. How much of the common good that survives will depend on how hard and effectively we fight for that good.

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## Note on Black Nones

By Don Wharton

The “Nones” are those who religiously identify as atheists, agnostics or no religion in particular. Some years ago, I calculated that black America was disaffiliating from religion at a rate that would equal the average Americans rate in five years. A black friend questioned my calculation at our recent community picnic. Given that it had been a while, it made sense to revisit my calculation.

A recent (08.29.2024) PRRI report based on the 2023 American Values Atlas (AVA) found, “Around one-quarter of Black Americans are religiously unaffiliated (24%). In 2013, Black Americans were more likely to identify as Christian (79%) and less likely to identify as unaffiliated (16%).” That translates into a 4.14% per year compounded rate of increase in disaffiliation for blacks.

The AVA had 27% of all Americans not affiliated with religion. That is only 3% more than the not affiliated rate for blacks. I am delighted that this suggests only three years are needed for blacks to equal the current overall American rate. The AVA is based on 50,000 interviews per year. The standard error for these statistics is likely to be low because of the very large American sample size..

While this is improved from my prior evaluation, our black friends still deal with more religious intensity in that community than white Americans. All “nones” cease identifying as a particular faith and are much less likely to expose themselves to on-going religious dogma. However, when I shared the above data with my black friend, he was almost angry. He said I did not look at the higher rates of continuing belief in God or daily prayer. Yes, this is a problem. Far fewer black Americans are willing to go all the way to identifying as atheists, agnostics or secular humanists. But it does suggest that there is some convergence of humanity’s various communities. American humanity is one community moving toward less supernaturalism. It is just easier for some than others.

## Chapter Reports

### Baltimore Secular Humanists (BSH)

We have meetings at various times and places around Baltimore, Baltimore County, and Harford County. Watch the meetup site for the latest events: <https://www.meetup.com/bsh-wash/>

There are also several other non-WASH meetup groups in the Baltimore area, including Human Values Network Meetup (<https://www.meetup.com/the-human-values-network-hvn/>) and Baltimore Atheists, that hold monthly discussion groups. BSH also posts notices of university lectures that are held in person or on Zoom.

We have posted events that are sponsored by Profs & Pints (<https://www.meetup.com/profs-and-pints-baltimore/>) with lectures from university professors. They charge an admission fee. Some of their past lectures can be found online: <https://www.profsandpints.com/online-talks>. We also posted an event sponsored by the Secular Student Alliance, entitled "Why is Project 2025 So Bad and How to Talk with Others," by Anne Nelson and Nancy MacLean. The talk is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgktaw030Fg>.

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### DC American Humanists (DC-AHA)

DC-Atheists, Humanists, and Agnostics group (DC-AHA) was meeting monthly at Across the Pond in Dupont Circle, but starting in 2025 we're moving to Madhatter (1319 Connecticut Ave NW, DuPont Circle) for happy hour the first Wednesday 6-8pm of the month.

We had Zoom Webinar for Greg Epstein's latest book [Tech Agnostic: How Technology Became the World's Most Powerful Religion, and Why It Desperately Needs a Reformation](#) (video on AHA's YouTube Channel)

### AHA NEWS

The American Humanist Association is currently hiring for Communications Director, Organizing Director, Legal Director. Job descriptions and applications [here](#).

By January 2025, the AHA will be wrapping up a campaign to [Stop Ron's War on Christmas](#). It brought awareness to the harm caused by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis forcing his religion instead of caring for his constituents, and organized a gift drive to provide toys, books, and everyday essentials to Florida families in need.

AHA's preparing an online community specifically for humanist parents and caregivers (within wider humanist Discord) so if you or someone you know is interested in joining please complete this survey to help develop Discord channels on parenting and caregiving: <https://form.jotform.com/243405985755064>.

Next graduate-level [Humanist Studies Program class is Spring Semester Humanist Worldviews: Then & Now](#), taking place weekly on Mondays January 13-April 8, 2025. Taught by Kevin Jagoe (Note: Course includes required readings, Zoom & discussion board participation, and assignments)

Upcoming [Further Reflection on Speak Up Humanists](#) with Douglas Berger runs Thursdays January 16, 23, and 30, 2025, 7-8:30pm ET. \$100 for three-part class on Zoom

AHA is joining Women's and People's March Saturday, January 18. Will share details on location and timing after march announces their plans.

The American Humanist Association is proud to host Humanist International's launch of their 2024 Freedom of Thought Report on January 30th, 2025, 6-7:30pm ET. The Freedom of Thought Report examines every country in the world for its record on upholding the rights and equality for non-religious people, considering issues of legal discrimination and outright persecution and violence. Look out for speaker and event announcements soon! Register to join free webinar [here](#).

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### DC Region Atheists (DCRA)

We host a Secular Zoom Community meeting on the second Thursday of each month at 7pm. We nourish our connections with like-minded secular people and discuss a broad range of topics on



religion, science and secularism. Please RSVP for a monthly meeting at:

<https://www.meetup.com/dc-atheists>

Our chapter is active in supporting Atheists Helping the Homeless, DC. They distribute the second Saturday of every month in Silver Spring at Progress Place (8106 Georgia Ave. Silver Spring MD). Typically they serve about 80 clients each month.

Further Events will be posted at:

<https://www.meetup.com/wash-202>

All are welcomed. We appreciate secular and scout-minded people who like to discuss a broad range of topics including science, religion, democracy, psychology and secular philosophy.

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### **Frederick Secular Humanists (FRESH)**

We continue to meet twice monthly with one social event and one speaker event. FRESH is currently looking to add another community service project and is beginning preparations for our main event, the Clothesline Project in April.

FRESH meets twice monthly in Frederick, MD. Our regular meetings are held on either the third or fourth Sunday of each month (based upon library availability) at the C. Burr Artz Public Library at 110 E. Patrick St., Frederick, MD 21701. Occasionally, if that venue is not available, we will meet at the Urbana Regional Library at 9020 Amelung St., Frederick, MD 21704.

Additionally, we meet for an informal social hour at the Brewer's Alley restaurant at 124 N. Market St., Frederick, MD 21701. Our events are announced on our Meetup Page.

For more information, please visit our webpage at <http://wash.org/fresh>

For event details please visit our Meetup Page: <https://www.meetup.com/fresh-wash/>

All are welcome to attend our events, but an RSVP on Meetup is appreciated.

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### **Maryland-DC (MDC)**

The MDC chapter hosted a well attended Humanlight gathering on December 21. There was fabulous food shared, a free raffle, and delightful conversation.

Saturday, January 18, 1-2:30pm we will have a meeting on **Messaging, Influencers and Modern**

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### **Shenandoah Area Secular Humanists (SASH)**

SASH is continuing our monthly meetings on various topics. We're planning future topics such as Addressing the Different Stages of Life and How to Pick Our Battles. We will continue to hold our meeting on Zoom, since we always have several attendees from far-flung places.

Our SASH book club also meets monthly. Our book club is reading "Myth America: Historians Take On the Biggest Legends and Lies About Our Past" edited by Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer.

If any WASH members want to join our discussions, they are certainly welcome. Contact me, and I'll put you on our distribution list: [sash@wash.org](mailto:sash@wash.org).

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### **Southeast Virginia Atheists, Skeptics & Humanists (SEVASH)**

We have finally secured a home for the first of our Free Little Humanist Libraries, which will be placed outside one of our frequent gathering spots, Elation Brewing / Voyager Coffee in Norfolk, VA. Now that we know where this library will be installed, we're getting to work on building the required supports. We're still working to secure a location on the peninsula for the installation of our second library.

The SEVASH book club finished "The Fault in Our Stars" by John Green, and is now reading "Contact" by Carl Sagan. We also attended a screening and discussion of "Queer Justice: Will & Harper" at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of

SEVASH volunteers have continued to sustain elevated efforts stocking and maintaining our Free Food Pantries in both Norfolk and Newport News. Some of our members volunteered at the Mayflower Marathon Food Drive for the Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia.

Members of SEVASH and FRESH met up to see the Skeptic's Guide to the Universe live on stage in DC at Miracle Theatre for their "Skeptical Extravaganza of Special Significance!"

All of this of course is in addition to our regular schedule of dinners, brunches, team trivia and other social gaming events.

<https://www.meetup.com/sevash/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/sevash/>

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## Nerd Corner

Holiday dessert comment.



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[washline@wash.org](mailto:washline@wash.org).

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