

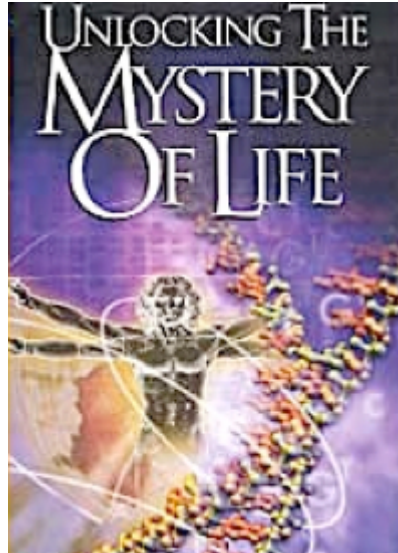


Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on March 15, 2012

Former NASA Employee Charges He Was Fired for “Intelligent Design” Views

A former computer specialist with NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) is suing the agency, charging that he was demoted and then fired for promoting his views on intelligent design, the belief that an intelligent power was responsible for creating the universe.

As reported by the [Associated Press](#), David Coppedge, who had led a team on NASA’s [Cassini mission](#) exploring Saturn and its surrounding moons, charges that that officials with the lab discriminated against him after he sparked conversation with co-workers about intelligent design, including handing out DVDs on the subject produced by an organization with which he is involved. In 2009, Coppedge was demoted from his “team lead” and was ultimately terminated after 15 years on the job.



Coppedge is being represented in the suit by the [Alliance Defense Fund](#) (ADF), a conservative legal advocacy group, and is being supported by the Seattle-based [Discovery Institute](#), a public policy think tank and proponent of intelligent design. John West, a director of the Institute’s [Center for Science and Culture](#), said that what Coppedge faced at JPL is “part of a pattern” in the scientific community by which those who advocate for a faith-based approach to science and creation are effectively silenced by the secular majority. “There is basically a war on anyone who dissents from Darwin and we’ve seen that for several years,” he said. “This is free speech, freedom of conscience 101.”

JPL officials insist that Coppedge’s termination occurred because his project was coming to an end. Josh Rosenau of the National Center for Science Education, a secular group that says intelligent design is nothing more than a dressed-up version of Bible-based creationism, argued that proponents of the theory are trying to capitalize on a job-related conflict. “It would be unfortunate if the court took what seems to be a fairly straightforward employment law case and allowed it to become this tangled mess of trying to adjudicate scientific matters,” Rosenau said. “It looks like a pretty straightforward case. The mission that he was working on was winding down and he was laid off.”

But Coppedge’s ADF attorneys insist that there is more to the story, and that their client was shunted aside, and ultimately fired, because of his views. “Employees shouldn’t be threatened with termination and punished for sharing their opinion with willing co-workers just because the view being shared doesn’t fit what’s politically correct,” said ADF Senior Counsel Joseph Infranco. Infranco pointed out that while JPL discriminated against Coppedge on the basis of his religious views, in reality Coppedge never brought religion into the discussion of intelligent design, which has many non-religious



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proponents. “Mr. Coppedge has always maintained that intelligent design is a scientific theory,” said Infranco. “Regardless, JPL discriminated against him on the basis of what they deem is ‘religion.’ The only discussion allowed is what fits the agenda. Stray, and you are silenced and punished.”

According to ADF’s account, “in March 2009, Coppedge’s supervisor, Gregory Chin, told him that co-workers had complained he was pushing his ‘religious’ views by discussing intelligent design and offering them DVDs even though he never did so with anyone unwilling to talk to him. Chin then said Coppedge would lose his job if he kept ‘pushing [his] religion.” According to ADF, Chin ordered Coppedge not to discuss politics or religion with anyone in his office, and repeatedly asserted that “intelligent design is religion.”

While Coppedge reluctantly told Chin that he would comply with the gag order, the next month “officials at JPL gave Coppedge a written warning for his ‘unwelcome,’ ‘harassing,’ and ‘disruptive’ activities,” the ADF account recalled. “The warning ordered him to refrain from such behavior or face further disciplinary action, including termination.” According to the ADF, Coppedge was denied requests for specifics about the allegations against him, and a few days later he was demoted. That demotion was followed up with a termination in 2011.

“Discussing the origins of the universe with willing co-workers is not punishable just because it doesn’t fit a prevailing view at JPL,” said another of Coppedge’s ADF attorneys, William J. Becker, Jr.

The lawsuit alleges that other issues contributed to the action against Coppedge, including his support for California’s Prop. 108 ballot measure that defines marriage as between a man and a woman. He had also requested that the annual “holiday” party be tuned back into a “Christmas” party as it had been previously designated.

“Because of those silly reasons and because he tried to talk to people the night before the Prop. 8 election about it — he wasn’t being pushy at all, but these people didn’t want to hear it — he was demoted,” Becker said. “In a normal environment, people would say, ‘I’m not on the same page with you, I don’t want to hear about it,’ but these people elevated it to the level of harassment and took it to his supervisor.”

Becker noted that Coppedge had a reputation among his co-workers for being serious about his Christian faith. “He did not go around evangelizing or proselytizing,” said Becker. “But if he found out that someone was a Christian he would say, ‘Oh that’s interesting, what denomination are you? He’s not apologizing for who he is. He’s an evangelical Christian.”

While the case has put the issue of intelligent design front and center in media accounts, Eugene Volokh, a professor of First Amendment law at the University of California-Los Angeles Law School, told AP that the case is at heart about whether the JPL discriminated against Coppedge. “The question is whether the plaintiff was fired simply because he was wasting people’s time and bothering them in ways that would have led him to being fired regardless of whether it was about religion, or whether he was treated worse based on the religiosity of his beliefs,” Volokh explained. “If he can show that, then he’s got a good case.”

Coppedge is an active participant in the intelligent design debate, operating a web site that extends the discussion through articles and blogs that interpret scientific issues through the lens of intelligent design. He is also a member of the board of [Illustra Media](#), the company that produces the DVD documentary on intelligent design (*Unlocking the Mystery of Life*) that Coppedge distributed to co-workers.



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