

Preemptive Strike Sought to Discredit Book Before It Was Published

For anthropologists, it was the e-mail heard 'round the world.

At the end of August, anthropologists Terence Turner of Cornell University and Leslie Sponsel of the University of Hawaii, Manoa, e-mailed the president of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) with a startling announcement about an "impending scandal" that would rock the discipline. A forthcoming book, *Darkness in El Dorado* by journalist Patrick Tierney, was charging several prominent researchers with mistreating the Yanomamo Indians in Venezuela—and worse. In "scale, ramifications, and sheer criminality and corruption," Turner and Sponsel wrote, the revelations in *Darkness* were "unparalleled in the history of Anthropology," and they urged that the charges be investigated. Within 2 weeks the e-mail had spread from AAA headquarters to what seemed to be the e-mail box of every anthropologist in the United States. "For a while there I was receiving it two or three times a day," says William Irons, an anthropologist at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. "It was incredible—I must have got several dozen copies."

Irons had reason to be concerned. Tierney's chief target was a longtime friend, Napoleon A. Chagnon of the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Chagnon is celebrated for his ethnographic studies of the Yanomamo, which began in 1964. But he contributed to another discipline, known variously as evolutionary psychology, Darwinian anthropology, or sociobiology. And it was this group of researchers—along with colleagues of the late James V. Neel, a renowned University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, geneticist also attacked by Tierney—that has most forcefully challenged *Darkness in El Dorado*.

Leading the charge was John Tooby, a Chagnon colleague at UCSB who is president of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (HBES). Known for his fierce advocacy of evolutionary psychology, Tooby quickly concluded that *Darkness in El Dorado* was "full of lies" and decided to blunt its "potentially dangerous" impact. "I couldn't sit by and let this book go unchallenged," he says.

Working almost full-time, Tooby, Irons, and other Chagnon friends, and the Michigan researchers assembled an anti-*Darkness* campaign so swift and forceful that it produced lengthy rebuttals of Tierney's work before he had published a single word. Like the original, vitriolic e-mail from Turner and Sponsel, the counterattack was based on early galleys of the book, some key details of which were changed in the published version. Many who joined the debate hadn't even seen the galleys, and Tierney—at the insistence of his publisher, W. W. Norton—declined to comment before publication. But if nothing else, the vehement anti- and pro-*Darkness* efforts illustrate how, for better or worse, the tactics of modern political campaigns, complete with opposition research, "war rooms," and over-the-top rhetoric, are infiltrating scientific research.

"Lives are at stake."

Chagnon is no stranger to controversy. His belief that Yanomamo culture is dominated by *waiteri* (ferocity) has long been a subject of dispute (see main text). But Tierney's detailed indictment was "something completely different," he says. "I've always had my critics, and some of them got kind of personal, but this kind of thorough attack is unheard of—he goes after my 'beer belly,' my dogs, and even the fact that I was raised in a small town in Michigan, which supposedly makes me a McCarthyite." Chagnon promises to respond in *The Noble Savage*, a book to appear next summer.

Tooby, for his part, did not want to wait that long. He thought the Turner-Sponsel warning was "scientifically illiterate," according to a manuscript he posted on his Web site. (A version was later published in the online magazine *Slate*.) Tooby wrote that he worried that people could misuse Tierney's claims to stop immunization programs in underdeveloped nations: "People, especially in poorer countries, would die as a result." After alerting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about the imminent publication of what he depicted as an antivaccination book that could kill "certainly in the thousands, possibly in the millions," Tooby urged CDC scientists "to get in touch with the journalists who I knew were working on the story."



No longer remote. The Yanomamo have become one of the most studied "remote" groups in the world.

Knowing that the Turner-Sponsel note was landing in reporters' laps, Tooby also spent "the next several days" in "a frenzy of calling, faxing, and e-mailing" the media. He put the case starkly to reporters. "Lives are at stake," he wrote. "Once a reputable first-world source such as [the journalist's organization] puts its prestige behind such a claim (even if it is hedged), no subsequent retraction will ever catch up with it or undo the damage."

Others went to work, too. With the support of Neel's family, the University of Michigan assembled what Michigan archaeologist Kent V. Flannery called "a fact-finding committee" of "physicians, epidemiologists, geneticists, biological anthropologists, ethnologists, ethnohistorians, archaeologists, documentary film specialists, and eyewitnesses to James Neel's and Napoleon Chagnon's fieldwork ... working together to figure out why such hideous allegations would be made about them in the media." They were supported by Neel's genetics colleagues, including L. Luca Cavalli-Sforza of Stanford University, who predicted in an e-mail to *Science* that Tierney's "pretentious and largely defamatory contribution" would soon be discredited.

At UCSB, Tooby, anthropology instructor Edward Hagen, and graduate student Michael Price set up what Hagen jokingly called a "war room"—"it's just filled with paper, and we've practically been living in it." By barraging journalists with e-mail, the researchers managed to hold off some press coverage; Tooby thought that he had helped kill a story at *The Washington Post*. "I couldn't believe the pressure they put on me," says a science journalist at another

paper. "They were saying, 'Even if you just truthfully report what people are saying, it will be misused and people will die because of what you wrote.' I felt like saying, 'Where was this concern when you were telling me that it wasn't Chagnon's fault if the gold miners or whatever misused his words?'"

Despite the pressure, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which had previously covered disputes over Chagnon, ran a story on 20 September. The AAA was forced to issue a statement promising a full investigation. From that point on, media coverage was intense. "Scientist killed Amazon Indians to test race theory," blared the headline in the *Guardian* of London on 23 September. *Darkness in El Dorado* was featured in *Newsweek*, *U.S. News*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, the BBC, and South American newspapers.

Meanwhile, Neel biographer and historian Susan Lindee of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia was reexamining Neel's field notes, writing on 21 September that the true events "were at some variance" with the version in the Turner-Sponsel e-mail. (Subsequently she retracted her statement that the notes proved "Neel had Venezuelan governmental permission to carry out the vaccine program.") Six days later, the University of Michigan "fact-finding team" issued a full refutation of the charges against Neel. Although he admitted he had not seen the galley proofs of Tierney's still-unpublished book, Michigan medical-school dean Allen Lichter told reporters that "we have complete confidence that [Neel's] actions were above reproach."

By 9 October, UCSB's Price had unofficially posted a long, harsh critique on a university Web site of Tierney's "numerous examples of error and deception." That same day *The New Yorker* published an excerpt of the book—the first chance for readers to see anything by Tierney himself. *Darkness in El Dorado* was nominated for the National Book Award 2 days later.

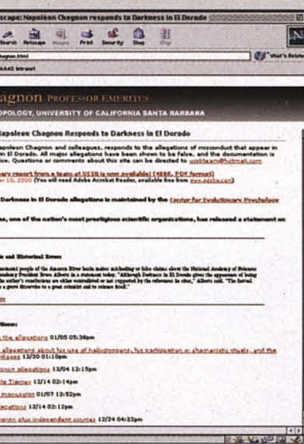
Political science

Meanwhile, Chagnon, faced with the upcoming publication of the book, lined up famous names in his defense, including Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, who wrote the foreword to the most recent revision of Chagnon's major Yanomamo book; evolutionist Richard Dawkins of Oxford University, author of *The Selfish Gene*; Massachusetts Institute of Technology cognitive scientist Steven Pinker; Tufts University philosopher Daniel C. Dennett; Harvard neuropsychologist Marc Hauser; and British science journalist Matt Ridley. Chagnon says he also began consulting libel lawyers "very seriously."

"It is clear to me that academics from all disciplines are going to make a stand on this," Chagnon wrote to supporters on 27 September. "It is not simply an attack on me, Jim Neel, and a few others, it is an attack on the integrity of all responsible scholars."

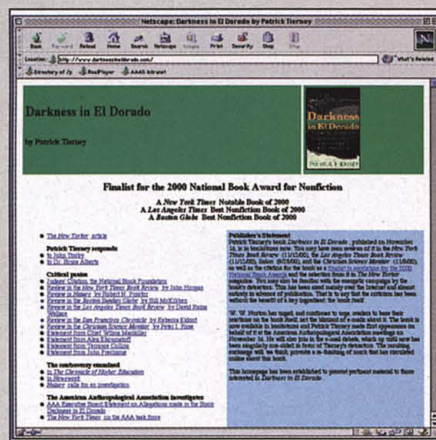
Arguing that releasing *Darkness* "after so much evidence has come to light showing Tierney's accusation to be false is ... unethical," Northwestern's Irons sent the 700 members of HBES on 4

November a proposal for boycotting W. W. Norton, Tierney's publisher. (Irons is the incoming president of HBES.) Unexpectedly, Bruce Alberts, president of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), leapt into the fray, issuing on 9 November a highly unusual statement deploping the "misleading or demonstrably false" statements in *Darkness in El Dorado*. Like other elements in the anti-Tierney campaign and the Turner-Sponsel e-mail, the statement attacked some claims that Tierney didn't actually make. For example, Alberts criticized Tierney for writing that Neel had "selected this vaccine mindful of its harmful results ... in order to record the response of the Yanomami to this 'virulent' virus vaccine in hopes of confirming eugenic theories that Neel purportedly espoused." But this charge—and the description of the vaccine as virulent—were not in the published book.



Battles in cyberspace.

Web sites attacking Tierney's book (above) proliferated before publication; the book's own site (left) offers detailed responses.



One day after Alberts released the NAS statement, Tooby and his UCSB colleagues posted a 60-page rebuttal of Tierney's book on their pro-Chagnon Web site (www.anth.ucsb.edu/chagnon.html). Their statement made the extraordinary claim that "The major allegations [in Tierney's book] appear to be deliberately fraudulent." Three days after that, the University of Michigan released an expanded version of its statement. By 16 November—*Darkness in El Dorado's* official publication date and the day before an AAA panel on the book at the association's annual meeting in San Francisco—lengthy counterarguments were available from half a dozen sources. In turn, Tierney's responses were available at www.darknessinelorado.com. And the press began weighing in with reviews, many of them favorable ("will become a classic of anthropological literature"—*The New York Times*).

The AAA open-mike session on 17 November was a confusing barrage of speakers, with pro- and anti-Tierney voices trading accusations of "racism" and "political correctness" in a welter of rapid citations. UCSB researchers handed out anti-Tierney flyers and copies of their "preliminary report."

The Brazilian Anthropological Association noted that it had complained to AAA about the "harmful effects" of Chagnon's research 11 years before. "As far as we know, nothing was done then," the Brazilians said. The AAA, for its part, announced that a special ad hoc task force would "examine assertions and allegations contained in *Darkness in El Dorado*" and decide by February "which specific issues, if any, are deserving of an in-depth investigation."

"The whole business was very odd," says William Denevan, an archaeologist emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who has worked extensively in Amazonia. "There's a lot of defensiveness on the part of the whole discipline of anthropology without really having the facts or details." He adds, "Very few of the people who spoke had actually done any research on the Yanomamo, yet they almost all had extremely strong opinions. And 95% of the audience hadn't read the book, but there they were clapping and cheering one side or the other."

—C.C.M.