PESSIMISTS ARCHIVE - APRIL 16, 2022

In 1903, New York Times predicted that airplanes would take 10 million years to develop Only nine weeks later, the Wright Brothers achieved manned flight. The pathologically cynical

The Birth of Quantum Mechanics

Special 10-part series by Dr. Marcelo Gleiser

always will find a reason to complain.

FLYING MACHINES WHICH DO NOT FLY. The ridiculous fiasco which attended the attempt at aerial navigation in the Langley flying machine was not unex-

pected, unless possibly by the distinguished Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, who devised it, and his assistants. Prof. MANLY, who undertook the

which will really fly might be evolved by the combined and continuous efforts of mathematicians and mechanicians in from one million to ten million years-provided, of course, we can meanwhile eliminate such little drawbacks and embarrassments as the existing relation between weight and strength in inorganic materials. No doubt the problem has attractions for those it interests, but to the ordinary man it would seem as if effort might be employed more profitably.

160

Answer 20 questions

to find out

www.test-iq.org

sprout them ab initio, it might

be assumed that the flying machine

EXPLORE

• The media once deemed flight, both in air and space, impossible or an act of egotism. • Perhaps most infamously, the *New York Times* predicted that airplanes would take one to ten million years to develop.

Credit: Newspapers.com

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Merely nine weeks later, the Wright Brothers achieved manned flight.

The pathologically cynical always will find a reason to complain. Listen to this article he cynical narrative around the private space

Louis Anslow

reactions to the early pursuit of air and space travel. We did a round up. 1901: The U.S. Navy called flight a "vain fantasy"

race feels unique to this moment of growing

discontent about wealthy technologists and

inequality, but it perfectly mirrors cynical (often forgotten)

George W. Melville, Engineer-in-Chief of the U.S. Navy, wrote a scathing article about the pursuit of manned flight. He began with a Shakespeare quote that implied the goal was a childish "vain fantasy" that "is as thin of substance as the air":

THE ENGINEER AND THE PROBLEM OF AËRIAL NAVIGATION. BY REAR-ADMIRAL GEORGE W. MELVILLE, ENGINEER-IN-CHIEF OF

THE UNITED STATES NAVY. "I talk of dreams Which are the children of an idle brain, Begot of nothing but vain fantasy, Which is as thin of substance as the air; And more inconstant than the wind." -Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet." In earlier times many thoughtful men have given unqualified recognition to the uses and delights of the imagination. But could they see now, in the light of history, with what folly human nature has pushed a noble truth to the extreme, they would realize that much of its wisdom and grandeur has been obscured by the abuse of the imagination and undue revelling in its pleasures. This folly has been always peculiarly manifest in natural

science, whence it penetrates to the field of applied mechanics.

Outside of the proven impossible, there probably can be found

no better example of the speculative tendency carrying man to the verge of the chimerical than in his attempts to imitate the birds, or no field where so much inventive seed has been sown with so little return as in the attempts of man to fly successfully through the air. Never, it would seem, has the human mind so persistently evaded the issue, begged the question and, "wrangling resolutely with the facts," insisted upon dreams being accepted

as actual performance, as when there has been proclaimed time and again the proximate and perfect utility of the balloon or of

now possessed by man, and the unremitting efforts on the part of many earnest investigators, pursuing methods of observation and

Notwithstanding the amount of accurate physical knowledge

the flying machine.

bold prediction

might be employed more profitably."

FLYING MACHINES WHICH DO NOT

own yacht."

stration of any physical fact to be."

Credit: JSTOR On the very first page he declared the entire notion a wasteful and delusional endeavor: "There probably can be found no better example of the speculative tendency carrying man to the verge of the chimerical than in his attempts to imitate the birds, or no field where so much inventive seed has been sown with so little return as in the attempts of man to fly successfully through the air." 1903: New York Times makes a

The New York Times predicted manned flight would take

between 1 and 10 million years to achieve, in an article

titled "Flying Machines Which Do Not Fly." The piece

ended: "To the ordinary man, it would seem as if effort

to sprout them ab initio, it might be assumed that the flying machine which will really fly might be evolved The ridiculous flasco which attended by the combined and continuous the attempt at aerial navigation in the forts of mathematicians and mechani-Langley flying machine was not unexcians in from one million to ten million pected, unless possibly by the distinyears-provided, of course, we can meanguished Secretary of the Smithsonian Inwhile eliminate such little drawbacks and stitution, who devised it, and his assistembarrassments as the existing relation ants. Prof. MANLY, who undertook the between weight and strength in inorganic

materials. No doubt the problem has attractions for those it interests, but to the ordinary man it would seem as if effort might be employed more profitably.

Credit: Newspapers.com Only nine weeks later, the Wright Brothers achieved manned flight. 1910: Flight is only for rich people

Once the Wright Brothers proved flight was possible, some

astronomer William H. Pickering said, "The expense would

force, can be united in a practical machine by which man shall fly long distances through the air, seems to the writer as complete as it is possible for the demon-

A few years later, another distinguished astronomer considered the prospects for aviation. He was William H. Pickering, well-known for his studies of the

"The popular mind often pictures gigantic flying machines speeding across the

Now let us consider a more modern example, and one pertaining more directly to astronautics. In July of 1955, President Eisenhower announced the first U.S. satellite program-Project Vanguard. At about that time, Dr. Richard van der

be prohibitive to any but the capitalist who could use his

assumed it was just a pointless rich play thing. Famed

Atlantic and carrying innumerable passengers in a way analogous to our modern steamships. . . . It seems safe to say that such ideas must be wholly visionary, and even if a machine could get across with one or two passengers the expense would be prohibitive to any but the capitalist who could own his own yacht. "Another popular fallacy is to expect enormous speed to be obtained . . . it is clear that . . . there is no hope of competing for racing speed with either our locomotives or our automobiles."

Credit: Newspapers.com We conquered the skies, then space beckoned... 1955: Space travel is "utter bilge" In 1955, President Eisenhower announced the first U.S.

satellite program. When asked about the project, a British

astronomer replied: "Space travel is utter bilge," saying it

British Astronomer Calls

Space Travel 'Utter Bilge'

LONDON, Nov. 11 (AP)-Dr soon send a rocket to the moon, Richard Van De. Reit Woolley, saying: "It is no use asking me. Britain's astronomer to the I am not an expert on rockets. court, left today for a lecture It is not a matter for astronomy.

would be a "frightful waste of public money."

Royal Stargazer Heads for Russia

tour in the Soviet Union, con- I do not expect to have any vinced any future form of space direct connection with the sateltravel would be "a frightful lite program while I am in Ruswaste of public money." sia. I am an astronomer.' The 51-year-old stargazer told Woolley will lecture at the reporters at London airport that Soviet Academy of Sciences in as an astronomer he had noth- Moscow, the Pulkovo Observaing to do with space projects. tory near Leningrad, and in the Of all Britons, Woolley seems Crimea. to have taken the dimmest view of the Soviet Sputniks. Claiming they were "propaganda efforts" Extra Pay Sought of limited scientific value, he expressed doubts about the pos- For Polar Service sibilities of space travel. Woolley would rather see AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND, funds for satellites go to build Nov. 11 (A)-U.S. Rep. John P. a giant telescope for his Green- Saylor (R-Pa) said today he will wich Observatory, but he told propose extra pay and a special newsmen he sees no prospect of medal for servicemen assigned to Antarctic duty. his getting the money. Asked if he still regarded The congressman leaves tospace travel as "utter bilge," morrow for the Antarctic. Woolley said with a thin smile, Saylor said he and Rear Adm. "It depends what you mean by George J. Dufek, head of U.S. bilge: I think it is a frightful military operations in the Antwaste of public money." arctic, agree that it is unfair for He also declined to predict Antarctic servicemen not to have

When President Kennedy announced his moonshot, there

was some enthusiasm, but soon a movement grew against

the idea. Barry Goldwater said it was a big waste (at a \$100-

saying: "While our eyes are fixed upon it, we could lose the

Moon Landing

A Big Waste,

Says Barry

a-plate dinner) and that the U.S. was "moon-struck,"

whether the Russians would special recognition

1960s: "Moondoggle"

earth or be buried in it."

MOON EXPLORATION boomed Republike administration Apollo astronauts Kennedy-pro

tics and Space Administra-

tion officials want to spend

much more than that. In

fine, if one dropped the Apol-

budget, without making a

single other federal econo-

my, at the end of two years

the deficit would have

ceased to be, and the Treas-

ury would boast of a fat sur-

Audience details from BBC and

ITV will not be immediately

available but, on the basis of the

CEGB's figures, it appears that

several millions watched the

minority, though the moon enthusiasts qualified their praise

by saying that America would

never have diverted their money

for philanthropic purposes if they

had not been engaged in spac

Mr Michael Power, a National

Union of Teachers field officer,

said it was only a trivial prestige

exercise which ignored the social conditions existing in the world.

He had not even watched the

tive said that if the money had

not been used on space it would

But a public relations execu-

Credit: Newspapers.com

Cynics were in a 20 per cent

Credit: Newspapers.com

plus of revenue.

Credit: Newspapers.com

may land on the moon this sum-ht at a free may land on the moon compose ht at a fund-mer, more Americans oppose w Jersey mer, more Americans opposed it a lung-the project than favor it, according to a Harris Survey reported yesterday in The New York Post. Credit: Newspapers.com Many Americans and even astronomers opposed the plan

for various reasons. Even former President Eisenhower

nuts." The term "moondoggle" was coined, and it stuck.

billion in a race to the moon for national prestige is

Utopian Moondoggle

By RUSSELL KIRK

Next fiscal year, accord-

ing to the Johnson adminis-

tration, the deficit of the

amount to \$4.9 billion. This

perennial deficit is a prince-

pal cause of creeping infla-

tion and of lack of confi-

dence in the dollar abroad.

Most people would like a bal-

anced national budget. I do

(who created NASA) said: "Anybody who would spend \$40

national government will lo Project from the annual

When the day of the moon landing arrived, public approval

everyone. The Guardian quoted a teachers' union organizer

who said he had decided to go to bed early on the night of

which ignored the social conditions existing in the world."

went to bed

By our own Reporter

moon walk.

adventures.

television.

July 20th, 1969 because it was "a trivial prestige exercise

was higher. The entire world was excited — but not quite

49% IN POLL OPPOSE

Only the few cynics

The postman, the barman,

the housewife from Ireland, the

university student, the

waitress, the street cleaner

from Poland, and the workman

plugging gas leaks in the main

road think the trip to the

moon was a magnificent

And many of them stayed up on

Sunday night to see David Frost

presenting it all on ITV, accor-

ding to a random poll in London

Electricity Generating Board,

which says that at 3 a.m. the electricity demand was 800,000

kilowatts above normal-"the

highest demand we've had in

recent years." The demand arose

The massive television look-in is corroborated by the Central

achievement.

yesterday.

after the moon landing when never have gone to the underdeveloped countries, or indeed viewers presumably were making anything else underdeveloped. their cups of tea Haters gonna hate These are important reminders that pathological cynics always will find a way to complain. Before air and space travel were possible, they said it was impossible. When they were proven wrong, they said it was an egotistical waste of money with no real utility. The pattern continues today.

run rampant in Europe, though

incompetence and technophobia

this time it is due to

rather than malice.

Woz Graphical user interfaces are how most of us interact with computers, from iPhones to laptops. But they were once condemned as making students lazy and destroying the art of writing.

Long before the Wordle mania, there was the crossword puzzle craze. And newspapers around the world condemned them as an "invasive weed" that caused mental illnesses and even murder.

CROSSWORD MANIA

PESSIMISTS ARCHIVE

puzzles before it

embraced them

Wordle: The New York

Times hated crossword

BREAKS UP HOMES

Neglected Cleveland Wives Said to Plan Divorces From

Stricken Husbands.

THINK

Optimism

pessimism

Why great thinkers

balance optimism and

is a recipe for stagnation and

▶ 15 min — with **Big Think**

perhaps even failure.

Leaning too far in either direction

THINKING

pessimism

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for causing insanity,

Chess was once blamed for

triggering mental health

said of video games.

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Chess was once blamed

suicide, and even murder

problems, including suicide and

even murder. Today, the same is

to experts

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Strange Maps

COLUMNS The Well 13.8

Conger ice shelf has collapsed: what you need to know, according A floating platform the size of Rome collapsed off of Antarctica.

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