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### FINDINGS

# A Clash of Polar Frauds and Those Who Believe

By [JOHN TIERNEY](#)

In September 1909, Dr. Frederick A. Cook and Robert E. Peary each returned from the Arctic with a tale of having reached the North Pole. Neither provided any solid proof or corroborating testimony; both told vague stories with large gaps. They couldn't even convincingly explain how they had plotted their routes across the polar ice.

Yet each explorer's claim immediately attracted its supporters, and no amount of contradictory evidence in the ensuing years would be enough to dissuade the faithful.

A century later, the "discovery" of the North Pole may qualify as the most successful fraud in modern science, as well as the longest-running case study of a psychological phenomenon called "motivated reasoning."

The believers who have kept writing books and mounting expeditions to vindicate Cook or Peary resemble the political partisans recently studied by [psychologists](#) and sociologists. When the facts get in the way of our beliefs, our brains are marvelously adept at dispensing with the facts.

The first people to believe Cook and Peary had obvious motivations: scooping rival newspapers and increasing circulation.

When Cook cabled his tale to The New York Herald (the newspaper promptly devoted its entire front page to the news: "Fighting Famine and Ice, the Courageous Explorer Reaches the Great Goal").

Several days later Peary cabled his claim to The Times, which had helped sponsor his expedition. The Times hailed his triumph, reporting that "the world accepts his word

without a shadow of hesitation” and quoting Peary’s denunciation of Cook as a fraud who “has simply handed the public a gold brick.”

Each explorer promised to provide proof, but neither had taken along a trained navigator to corroborate the feat with independent celestial observations. Cook wasn’t even competent himself to make the observations.

Peary was an expert navigator and traveled with companions who could also use a sextant, but he left them behind for the final week’s push. Then, with no other trained navigator present, his daily rate of progress suddenly doubled.

Most puzzling of all, his expedition traveled for hundreds of miles across the ice without making any celestial observations to determine their longitude and to make sure they hadn’t veered off course to the east or west. Then, after five weeks, Peary made an observation and refused to reveal the results to his companions. He was reported to look disappointed, and he left his diary pages blank that day. But he would later tell the rest of the world that his observation had confirmed his arrival at the pole.

How, in moving across jumbled pack ice continuously drifting in the wind and ocean currents, did Peary unerringly travel right to the North Pole? How did he achieve a nearly 500-mile “pole-in-one,” as the historian Dennis Rawlins would later dub it?

In 1909, such questions didn’t trouble The Times, the [National Geographic Society](#) and Peary’s other supporters. They were so busy denigrating Cook’s claim — “the most astonishing imposture since the human race came on earth,” according to The Times — that they overlooked flaws in their own hero. This is not surprising, really, at least not to researchers who have studied both Democrat and Republican partisans [using brain scans](#) and other techniques.

When we contemplate contradictions in the rhetoric of the opposition party’s candidate, the rational centers of our brains are active, but contradictions from our own party’s candidate set off a different reaction: the emotional centers light up and levels of feel-good [dopamine](#) surge.

With our rational faculties muted, sometimes the unwelcome evidence doesn’t even register, and sometimes we use marvelous logic to get around the facts.

In one study, Republicans who blamed [Saddam Hussein](#) for the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, were presented with strong counterevidence, including a statement from President [George](#)

[W. Bush](#) absolving Hussein. But most of the people in the study went on blaming Hussein anyway, as [the researchers report](#) in the current issue of Sociological Inquiry.

Some of the people ignored or rejected the counterevidence; some “counterargued” that Hussein was evil enough to do it; some flatly said they were entitled to counterfactual opinions. And some came up with an especially creative form of motivated reasoning that the psychologists labeled “inferred justification”: because the United States went to war against Hussein, the reasoning went, it must therefore have been provoked by his attack on Sept. 11.

This is the sort of backward logic employed by Peary’s supporters in recent decades. As scholars and explorers with much more Arctic experience than Peary have rejected his claim, the supporters have tried furnishing the missing proofs and explanations: if Peary said he made it to the pole, there must have been a way to do it.

They have dreamed up ways for him to navigate precisely north by studying wind patterns in the snow, looking at the sun or observing shadows. They have suggested he navigated by compass (even though it is notoriously difficult to use near the magnetic pole). They’ve tried to match his speeds near the pole (but have failed even when guided by GPS).

They have analyzed Peary’s photographs and concluded that the shadows offer the long-sought proof he was at the pole, according to a report for the National Geographic Society in 1989. The society hailed the report as “unimpeachable” and today stands by it and by Peary’s claim to the pole.

But the report was criticized by outside experts, who concluded that the photos could have been taken more than 100 miles from the pole. Another of the report’s assertions, that Peary’s accurate steering was plausible because Roald Amundsen had used reached the South Pole in a similar manner, was directly contradicted by evidence that Amundsen had relied on regular observations to determine longitude.

Among polar experts today, the consensus is that Peary got much closer than Cook, but not to the pole. Some suggest Peary gave up the day he took that solitary observation because he realized how far off course he had gone; some suspect he had earlier avoided taking longitude observations so as not to leave a paper trail of his route. (For more on the continuing debate — and for who really reached the pole first — go to [nytimes.com/tierneylab](http://nytimes.com/tierneylab).)

Mr. Rawlins and another prominent polar scholar, Robert M. Bryce, doubt that Peary got much closer than 100 miles to the pole. Mr. Bryce, who recently [discovered the draft of the](#)

[Cook telegram](#) that started the controversy, figures that Cook stopped more than 400 miles short.

Mr. Bryce is the author of “Cook & Peary” (1997), an 1,100-page book subtitled, “The Polar Controversy, Resolved,” but Mr. Bryce knows it’s not resolved in all minds. Although some of the loyalists have lost faith (The Times ran a formal correction in 1988, citing Peary’s “unreliable” records and his “incredible” speeds), both explorers still have their supporters at the Frederick A. Cook Society, the National Geographic Society and elsewhere.

Mr. Rawlins who is the editor of [Dio](#), a science history journal, says he cannot think of any modern scientific fraud that has been so profitable and popular and endured a century.

The only longer-lived example that comes to mind, he says, are the second-century astronomical “observations” of Ptolemy that were apparently derived not from the sky but from his theories.

Ptolemy’s tables were used for more than 14 centuries, which seems like a hard record to beat. But with sufficiently motivated reasoning, who knows? In 1909, after Cook’s loyalists ignored the evidence of fraud provided by Cook’s own traveling companions, the Independent magazine wearily predicted, “There will be a ‘Cook party’ to the end of time, no matter how strong the evidence brought against him in the future.” A century later, there is still a Peary party, too.

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