Neil deGrasse Tyson Channels Deepak Chopra on 'Conan'

Astrophysicist and science communicator Neil deGrasse Tyson appeared recently on Conan O'Brien's show. As usual, he was engaging, charismatic, amusing... and full of nonsense.

This has become something of a pattern for Dr. Tyson. His TV series, Cosmos, was visually striking but scientifically underwhelming. Worse, several episodes were riddled with historical errors and half-truths, as ACSH President Hank Campbell wrote for The Federalist [2].

When the topic isn't astrophysics, Dr. Tyson doesn't seem to know what he's talking about. Conan asked Dr. Tyson about his thoughts on science and math education in the U.S., which the talk show host correctly noted ranks poorly compared to other countries. Dr. Tyson answered by first explaining how the promotion of science has been a bipartisan endeavor going back 70 years to the Truman Administration. So far, so good. But, then he remarked:

> The United States rose up, out of a backwards country, to become the leading nation in almost every important way of innovation and technology. And we've been coasting for the last couple of decades.

President Truman was in office when World War II ended in 1945. The United States was hardly a backwards country. The U.S. economy surpassed that of the British Empire in 1916 [3], which means that the U.S. indisputably has held the title of "world's largest economy" for 101 years. Post-war Europe was a shambles, so the only major competitor left after the war was the Soviet Union.
For sure, government investment is one of the reasons why American science is #1 in the world today, but Dr. Tyson painted a very inaccurate picture of U.S. history.

His comment that "we've been coasting for the last couple of decades" is completely wrong. American science is #1 in the world [4] and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future. This is because, by a wide margin, the U.S. outspends every other country on Earth in research and development. We also have the most Nobel Prize winners, and American higher education is the best in the world. True, our K-12 education is mediocre, but it's been that way since at least 1964 [5] (despite the fact we spend more money per capita on K-12 students than most other countries). Notwithstanding our lackluster performance in international standardized tests, we continue to dominate science and technology.

Dr. Tyson then went on to discuss microbiology and philosophy. This was another mistake.

You exist because they [microbes] do your digesting. And they exist because you provide a vessel for that to happen. That's a biological cosmic perspective... In that context, you can't think of yourself as separate and distinct anymore -- because that's how we define "being special," I'm different, and I'm special, and I'm distinct -- it's we are special because we're the same, we are one, not only with each other but with the universe itself.

We are one with the universe? Was Dr. Tyson channeling Deepak Chopra [6]? What does that even mean? It's certainly not a scientific perspective.

He's also wrong about humans not being distinct. Each one of us is distinct; not even identical twins are completely identical. And yes, that makes each of us special.

Mom was right, and Neil deGrasse Tyson is wrong. Again.

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