

# Begun, This Clone War Has

By ACSH Staff — May 16, 2002

Both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* strongly condemned the Brooklyn Museum of Art recently when that august institution decided to devote a large exhibition space to the art of the Star Wars films. The Journal saw the exhibit as evidence of the decline of civilization while the Times was aghast at the crass commercialization of art. I loved it, and I'd argue that Star Wars movies are more relevant to the real world than they might at first appear.

Today, for instance, brings opening day for the latest installment in the series, *Attack of the Clones*, while the Senate (the real-life Senate) contemplates passing a cloning ban within the next few days. The folks at the American Enterprise Institute, a bit more far-sighted on the Star Wars issue than the Times or Journal, were nice enough to let me weigh in with the following piece on the week's cloning developments, real and cinematic, on their site:

## **Begun This Clone War Has**

By Todd Seavey

Is science fiction obsolete, given how much like sci-fi real life has become? This month brings a likely vote in the Senate on whether to ban all forms of cloning, while in theatres the new Star Wars movie depicts the Galactic Senate dealing with the outbreak of the Clone Wars (as Yoda grimly announces in the line of dialogue that gives this column its syntactically-unusual title). My interests in science, politics, and imaginative media all seem to have blurred together this week.

Make no mistake about it: the record will show that I am firmly opposed to creating a conquering army of evil stormtroopers led by a Dark Lord of the Sith. On the other hand, the replication of individual, microscopic, perfectly mindless cells in petri dishes in order to treat devastating diseases hardly seems as threatening. In fact, a number of conservatives are among the signers of this petition in support of so-called therapeutic cloning: [www.FranklinSociety.org](http://www.FranklinSociety.org) [1].

Many people, though, are frightened by the thought that such strange, new things are even being debated. Only yesterday, it seemed, we lived in a cozy, easy-to-understand world of totalitarian ideologies and growing nuclear arsenals and now we're thrust against our wills into a world of cybernetic limbs for the disabled, artificial intelligence research, electrode-wearing chimps who can control robot arms with their minds, the Internet, handheld computers, unmanned military planes, bio-engineered crops, cloned farm animals, and talk of building a permanent space elevator to do high-altitude launches. Can you blame people for finding all this a bit horrific and wanting to slow progress down?

Well, yes, you can blame them, and with any luck, the Luddite forces in our midst will suffer at least a partial defeat in the Senate. The Senate may carve out an exception in its ban, allowing therapeutic cloning to proceed, in the name of medical research. That is, if the William Kristols,

Jeremy Rifkins, and Francis Fukuyamas of the world fail in their ongoing effort to make the public think there's no fundamental difference between making more pancreas cells for diabetics and, say, making more marauding clone soldiers to serve the Dark Side of the Force.

So how will *Star Wars: Episode II Attack of the Clones* affect this political battle? Well, at first glance it would appear that a generation of children is about to be indoctrinated with anti-clone propaganda. For all the fairy-tale qualities of the Star Wars films, Lucas is not above slipping political messages into his films or did you not notice that the mediocre *Phantom Menace* featured an arch-capitalist, tax-protesting, trade-loving, quasi-Japanese villain with the triply-punning name Nute Gunray, surely a summation of Lucas's political anxieties in the early 90s when he conceived the film?

Luckily, cautionary sci-fi tales have a long, proud history of backfiring. Hardly anyone could follow what the trade dispute at the heart of *Phantom Menace* was, so that film's only lasting message was "Audiences hate Jar Jar." A few months before that, audiences left *The Matrix*, a movie about humans trying to escape a sinister virtual reality program, thinking, "I wish I had a virtual reality program like that!" A few years earlier, despite Spielberg and Crichton going to great lengths to create an anti-biotech fable with *Jurassic Park*, kids across America were left hoping the day will come when they can trade in computer-generated dinosaurs for genetically-engineered dinosaurs, and the wait is sometimes frustrating. Sci-fi, much as I love it, keeps peddling scare stories (and sci-fi fans, not easily frightened, keep hoping the world will soon resemble those stories.

I still have faith enough in the nerdier teenagers of this nation to expect that they'll go home after *Attack of the Clones* hoping to be told by their parents either that (a) they were conceived through cloning or at least that (b) the cloning of individual cells is going to be used to cure Grandma of Parkinson's once and for all, which makes Grandma sort of like Darth Vader (cool!). Of course, teens won't get out of those movie screenings until Friday, by which time (in the real world) cloning may already be illegal, and in any case most of those teenagers won't be voting for a while yet.

But the future looks marvelously open-ended, and I'm confident some very strange and wonderful things will happen in the long run while sci-fi and legislation get left far behind.

*Todd Seavey edits HealthFactsAndFears.com and has written for various publications, including Justice League of America comic books. He is writing a book entitled Conservatism for Punks. The piece above first appeared on the website of The American Enterprise magazine.*

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[1] <http://www.FranklinSociety.org>