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Thursday, Sep 23, 2004

## Dave Barry

**5**minuteherald



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Posted on Sun, Nov. 09, 2003

### Scientists launching spacey idea

DAVE BARRY

Just when you think all the great ideas have been thought of, scientists dream up a concept so radical, and so innovative, that you wonder if they've been smoking reefers the size of Yule logs.

Such is the case with a group of scientists from the National Research Laboratory in Los Alamos, N.M. ("Los Alamos" is Spanish for "More than One Alamo"). According to an Associated Press story that I am not making up, these scientists are proposing to build an elevator that would be 62,000 miles high. That's right: 62,000 MILES, which is 32 million stories. At the top would be a revolving restaurant serving what the scientists promise will be "really mediocre food."

No, seriously, the scientists want to use the elevator to launch stuff into space. One of them is quoted as saying: "The first country that owns the space elevator will own space." Laugh if you want, but those words are eerily reminiscent of an equally bold prediction by Chester Gould, the man who created Dick Tracy. Gould once stated: "The nation that controls magnetism controls the universe." People scoffed, but in 1963, a vehicle called the Magnetic Space Coupe, based on Gould's theories, actually flew to the Moon, and returned safely, in a widely syndicated comic strip.

It remains to be seen whether the space elevator will achieve that level of success, but the Los Alamos scientists are confident. Their plan is to build it using "carbon nanotubes," which, in layperson's terms, are nanotubes made out of carbon.

#### RIDE OF YOUR LIFE

The advantage of the space elevator is economic. To send a satellite up on a rocket, the way we do now, costs \$15,000 per kilogram (one kilogram equals 2,038 bushels). But if you had a space elevator, you'd just get on there with your satellite, press the button for the top floor, and ride to the top (this could take several years if those darned kids got on there ahead of you and pushed all 32 million buttons). When the door opened at the top, you'd heave the satellite into space, then quickly press the "close door" button to prevent the vacuum from sucking your internal organs out through your eye sockets.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: "From a scientific perspective, that scenario is ridiculous! Those 'close door' buttons never work!"

Unfortunately, you are correct. According to a recent Wall Street Journal article by Jared Sandberg, elevator "close door" buttons are fake. They're non-functioning dummies with no actual effect, like Congress. Not only that, but according to Sandberg, most office thermostats are also dummies: They're there, but they do nothing. Granted, this is also true of some office workers, but that is not the point. The point is that we, as a nation, have been duped long enough by phony controls.

#### PESKY LAWYERS

I have a friend named Ted Habte-Gabr, who -- after overcoming a tragic childhood accident that required surgeons to remove several of his vowels -- worked for a while in the elevator business (or, as Ted calls it, the "vertical transportation industry"). Ted says that one of the industry's major headaches is the following scenario, which, according to Ted, "usually involves lawyers":



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It's a busy office building. The elevator is crowded. Two people, Person A and Person B, are talking. The elevator stops on Person A's floor. Person A gets out, but holds the door open, and keeps talking to Person B. The door buzzer goes off; everybody else on the elevator is waiting; people on other floors are waiting; but they keep talking, because in their legal opinion the inconvenience to everyone else is less important than their conversation, which, according to Ted, is usually about who gets to use the law firm's tickets to sporting events.

THIS is when you need a working "close door" button. Although some people feel even stronger measures would be needed. A reader named Mike Seidel proposes that "the answer is to have the door behave normally for one holding (i.e., if someone is legitimately running for the elevator and needs to stop it). After that, however, adamantium blades shoot out and lop off any appendages holding the doors open."

Another reader, Barry Sullivan, proposes that: "The answer is to apply voltage to the elevator doors as they are held open. This could be ramped up to, say, 5,000 volts over 10 seconds. So let go or die."

Of course these measures could result in hideously gory mishaps, possibly involving senior partners. There probably are also disadvantages, although none come to mind. So to the Los Alamos scientists, I say: Forget the space elevator. If you want to help humanity, tackle the jerks-holding-doors problem, so humanity can get to its floor and get off. Because it smells in here.

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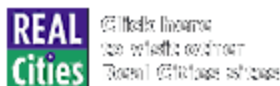
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