

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet
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Editor: Kent Harker

KNOCK WOOD
by Paul Chance

This article first appeared in "Psychology Today" and is used with permission. Thanks to BAS director John Lattanzio for sending it to "BASIS."

Years ago I had a fountain pen that I always used for important things such as taking tests and filling out job applications. It was my lucky pen. It didn't have all the right answers, but with it I thought I could present my ignorance in the most favorable light. I was superstitious in those days, but I have reformed. I gave up all my superstitions, thanks largely to the work of psychologists, who showed me how foolish I was. B. F. Skinner did what was probably the first superstition experiment. He had shown earlier that with few grains of seed, you can get a pigeon to do nearly anything you want. You merely wait for the desired response, or a reasonable approximation of it, and then provide some food. Each time you do this, the rewarded response becomes stronger.

But Skinner wondered about the effect of offering food regularly regardless of what the bird did. One day he put a pigeon into a cage and provided grain every 15 seconds. The bird didn't have to lift a feather to earn these meals, but after awhile it began behaving oddly -- it started turning in counterclockwise circles. Most other birds treated in this way also acquired unnecessary habits. One stretched its neck toward a corner; another made brushing movements toward the floor; a third repeatedly bobbed its head up and down, as if dancing to some imaginary drumbeat.

Now, none of this activity had any effect; the food arrived every 15 seconds no matter what. Yet the birds behaved as if their actions made the food appear. They had become "superstitions," but why?

Skinner's explanation was quite simple. The first time food arrived, the bird had to be doing SOMETHING. If the bird happened to be bobbing its head up and down, then that response was strengthened. This meant that the next time food arrived, the bird was likely to be bobbing its head. The second appearance of food further strengthened head-bobbing, and the cycle continued.

Thus, argued Skinner, superstitious behavior is the product of coincidental reward.

There is evidence that coincidental reward plays a role in human superstition. In one study, researchers asked high school students to press one or more telegraph keys. If they pressed the third key from the left, a bell would sound, a light would go on and they would earn a nickel. However, the students made money only if they pressed the key a second time after a short interval. If they simply did nothing for a few seconds and then pressed key 3 again, they would be rewarded. But they didn't know that, so they spent the interval pressing keys. Eventually the delay period would end, the student would again press key 3, the bell would ring and the light would flash. Key presses that occurred during the delay were strengthened through coincidental reward.

The result was that each student worked out a pattern of key presses, such as 1-1-2-2-3-3 or 4-3-2-1-2-3, and stuck with it. None of this behavior, except pressing key 3, had any effect. But the students were convinced they had worked out the essential combination of key strokes.

Indeed, society is more dedicated to noting evidence in favor of superstition than it is to observing contrary evidence.

Although superstition no doubt owes much to coincidental reward, some psychologists insist there is more to the story. If a boy finds a four-leaf clover and shortly afterward trips over a dollar, he may well believe that such clovers are lucky. But it is unlikely that the coincidental appearance of four-leaf clovers and dollars accounts for the popularity of this superstition. However, a boy may hear adults praise the four-leaf clover's power. If the boy finds a four-leaf clover and something lucky happens to him a week later, the adult will undoubtedly say, "See, that's because of that four-leaf clover you found." If the boy finds another four-leaf clover and nothing good happens to him until puberty, no one points to the clovers' failure.

Society is more dedicated to noting evidence in favor of superstition than it is to observing contrary evidence. This prejudice goes a long way toward explaining our superstitious nature. When the survivors of a plane crash are interviewed, some of them inevitably insist that they were saved by prayer. The chances are good that some who did not survive also prayed for all they were worth, but they are unable to testify about the value of the procedure. Arguing that evidence for superstitions is biased is unlikely to impress believers, who will point to someone who should have died six or seven times in a motorcycle accident but was saved by a good-luck charm to endure the ecstasy of life in a coma. Skeptics might reason that if the charm were going to the trouble of making a miracle, it might have done a better job. But that logic won't disturb the faithful.

Of course, some superstitions probably have a measure of practicality. In the days of wooden ships and iron men, sailors believed that having a woman on board was bad luck. It doesn't take much imagination to find some sense in the idea that the combination of one woman and 30 or 40 men, isolated at sea for months on end, could prove volatile. Similarly, in some primitive societies hunters engage in a ritual bath

before stalking their prey to make themselves pure in spirit. The bath also may make them harder to detect, thus improving their chances of success.

True superstitions are activities that have no effects on events but exist because of coincidental rewards and society's prejudices. Of course, I no longer have any superstitions. After I learned from my fellow psychologists how foolish superstitions are, I shed them all. A black cat does nothing to me now, nor does a broken mirror. There are no little plastic icons on the dashboard of my car, and I carry no rabbit's foot. I am free of all such nonsense, and I'm happy to report no ill effects -- knock wood.

THE "TRANSFORMATION" OF WHITLEY STRIEBER

by Robert Sheaffer

On September 21, 1988, viewers of the popular daytime television show "People Are Talking" on KPIX, Channel 5, in San Francisco saw an amazing thing. Whitley Strieber, author of such popular works of fiction as "The Wolfen", and "The Hunger", as well as the best-selling and supposedly true accounts of humanoid visitation in "Communion" and "Transformation", indignantly refused to let the hosts of the show do any promotion of his latest book! No doubt the viewers of that show are still scratching their heads about such inexplicable behavior on the part of a guest doing a book promotion tour. As the other guest on that show, the one who was all but ignored by the hosts, let me explain why that strange scene happened.

Forty-five minutes before air time, I arrived at the studio and was escorted to the Green Room, where guests are groomed and prepared. There I came upon Whitley Strieber in the midst of a world-class temper tantrum. He was indignantly refusing to go on! He apparently expected to be the only guest, and to have an entire hour to expound his unchallenged and unquestioned fantasies about the humanoid "visitors" who are said to be lavishing their unwanted attention on him. I later found out that while he had left instructions with those arranging the tour that under no circumstances would he appear on any show with Philip Klass, he had not ruled out -- at least to them -- appearing with some other skeptic. The producer of "People Are Talking," Karen Stevenson, a young woman of great firmness and tact, was sitting there quietly enduring Whitley's verbal assaults. "I don't know who this man is," complained Strieber, "and I don't know what he will say!" Apparently he expects all opposing opinions to be cleared in advance. Karen firmly repeated that she had made all arrangements with his publisher and his publicist, in accordance with their instructions, and they had raised no objections. The young woman representing his publicist sat there quietly and somewhat nervously, obviously wishing she were somewhere else.

He continued his tirade. Pointing to me, he shouted, "That man is going to go on and challenge my mental health. He's going to call me crazy! He's with that CSICOP, they are just as nuts as those new-

agers. They have a religion of disbelief."

In this outburst against skeptics, who he says are in the habit of calling anyone who disagrees with them crazy, Strieber called us "nuts" or "crazy" three times. I pointed out the irony of this, but it was clear from the reaction of all involved that the best thing I could say was nothing. I kept silent for a while, enabling him to resume his tirade. He had received long letters from Philip Klass of CSICOP, he said, that were "crazy," and made no sense at all. He also charged that the hosts of the show were bound to misrepresent his experiences by saying that they are alien visitors, while he has never claimed to know whether or not "the visitors" are extraterrestrial. Those people who claim alien encounters are just as crazy as CSICOP, he charged.

Strieber also claimed to be upset about the previous time he was on the show. Karen recalled that it had gone very well, but Strieber insisted it was a "stupid" show. She suggested that he was perhaps confusing it with a show in some other city called "People Are Talking," of which there are several. No, he insisted, he recalled perfectly. The audience at this show was stupid and they asked stupid questions, and they accused him of being crazy. "I don't need your show," he continued, "your stupid show! My book ["Transformation"] is number four on the Best-Seller list. I don't need to do these shows! I'm getting so fed up with going on shows and having everyone laugh at me!"

Karen emphasized that a live show would be starting very soon, on which he had agreed to appear, and that he must meet his commitments. But Whitley still refused to go out and appear or debate with me. "Let him go on first. I'll just do the final segment. And DON'T mention my book! I don't want you to mention my book at all if he is going to be criticizing it!" Karen once again reaffirmed that he had made a commitment. Then Strieber must have realized that he couldn't win this battle. He gradually decreased his level of objection, and the bluster slowly faded as it became clear that he was not going to be able to keep me off the show. "All right," said Whitley, "I will go on -- but I WON'T LIKE IT!" The magnitude of that threat stunned all who were present. "And I'll never come back!"

We then broke for makeup. The assistant director of the show, Lisa Tatum, had arrived in the doorway of the Green Room a little earlier, standing there silently in obvious bewilderment. Karen excused herself to go talk to the hosts of the show. The makeup man, who had been listening to all this from the adjoining room, expressed astonishment to me about Whitley's behavior as he applied a light coat of powder to my face. Returning to the Green Room, in the few minutes remaining before air time, I attempted to engage Whitley in a substantive discussion to disarm his hostility. I succeeded to a small extent. He objected mightily to CSICOP and everything it stands for, displaying an extreme hostility to science as well. To him, both CSICOP and the "new agers" are "fascists," because they both seek to break down the individual.

We went on stage then, got our microphones on, and waited for the show to begin. Whitley said nothing, and still refused to allow the hosts to mention the name or to show the cover of the book he came to promote. We came on camera, and as I expected, the early minutes of the show were entirely his, to tell his stories of things that go bump in the night, things that allegedly come into his bedroom, carry him up somewhere into the sky, and poke needles into his skull and nose to implant probes. He neglected to describe, at least on the air, how the beings allegedly inserted a long, cylindrical probe up his rectum, or how the female humanoid was very interested in his penis, as was recounted in "Communion". The situation must have seemed at least a little odd to the viewers: here is a guest with many weird tales to tell, but apparently without any book in which it is told.

I expected to be given a similar amount of time to question the plausibility and substance of such claims, but I had only the briefest opportunity to respond. The two hosts then took the show to the audience for questions -- previewed by them -- all of which except one were directed to Strieber. It became clear that I was never going to get the time to speak I was expecting. I tried interrupting a few times, but after speaking only a few words, the hosts moved on to something else. Clearly, some kind of arrangement had been made, keeping my time to the absolute minimum, probably because they feared that Strieber might walk off the set. One questioner asked if Strieber had attempted to trap or photograph the visitors. Indeed he had, he replied, using video cameras, still cameras, and other devices. Unfortunately, something always goes wrong with the attempt, such as the camera batteries going dead; "the visitors" seem to possess the ability to thwart all attempts to document their presence. I was dumbfounded by a question directed to me by co-host Ross McGowen as he worked the audience: "You DO believe that men have landed on the moon, don't you?" Apparently Whitley had succeeded in selling, at least to the show's staff, his notion that to question his visions of "the visitors" was as perversely blind as those who insist that the space program is a fraud! I responded that 99.9 percent of the scientific community do not accept accounts of the kind Strieber relates.

During the commercial break before one of the final segments, Karen dashed out on the set to ask Strieber if he wanted his book to be "promo-ed." "NO!" he flatly replied. I said that I would like to have MY book, "The UFO Verdict", "promoted." Whitley said, still annoyed, "Yes, promo HIS book!" This was done, briefly. In the final fifteen seconds of the show, Ross asked Strieber from across the room if he wanted to mention his book. "NO!" he snarled, then paused, and sheepishly muttered, "it's `Transformation'." Within seconds of going off the air, he had left the studio. The Prima Donna was still furious.

In the final analysis, Strieber's visions of "the visitors" undoubtedly have more to do with religion and psychology than they do with anything extraterrestrial. Strieber is far from the first person in history to experience visions of bizarre beings, and then become transformed into a tireless evangelist seeking to convince the world that they are real. Many religions were founded in precisely this

manner; indeed, the very titles he has chosen for these books about "the visitors" places them firmly in the realm of religion. There seems little room for doubt that Strieber firmly believes what he is saying. There is also not the slightest bit of physical evidence that any of it is true. But truth has never been a necessary element for making a nonfiction book a success, as we see from the 1987 success of "Communion" as a #1 Best-Seller, and "Transformation" now seems headed toward similar success. As skeptics, this will not surprise us, but as citizens concerned about the future of education and rational thought, it gives us reasons for grave concern.

SNAKE OIL STILL HERE

by Patricia Hammond

It is not difficult to understand why quackery has such lasting appeal, but in this age of modern medical miracles, it is not easy to understand why quackery is on the rise. It may be that packaging and promotion are all there is to it because the public is so much more health conscious, and modern quacks are more adept at packaging and promotion.

This recent increase in quack appeal is exacting an enormous cost: the latest government estimates show that Americans spend a small fortune in dollars (billions lost on useless tests and treatments) and in medical consequences (failure to get needed therapy when it can be the most effective). The sheer number of us using these questionable health-care methods is alarming: Harris poll figures reveal that 26 percent have used one or more fringe nostrums. Most of the cases involve areas of health care most prone to quackery -- cancer, arthritis, etc.

Not surprisingly, about a third of those using alternate methods reported significant improvement -- findings consistent with the placebo effect in which approximately one third of all medical conditions are improved irrespective of the treatment. Especially effective in these cases are factors such as the patient's belief in his or her doctor. Study after study has confirmed that about sixty percent of the complaints we bring to physicians are at least partly based on emotional features.

"But what about modern medicine?" critics of the anti-quackery campaign cry. There are certain types of surgery that have never undergone careful scientific testing for effectiveness before they are used, and some scientific procedures are so much more costly and potentially more dangerous than techniques labeled fraud.

The difference is that a medical procedure administered under established scientific guidelines will be quickly abandoned when found to be ineffective; examples are as many as one can imagine. Quackery, on the other hand, is never wont to let go of a gimmick no matter how often it has been proven empty. Frauds never give up. It is almost axiomatic that the older the nostrum the more revered it is likely to

be regarded.

Quackery plays upon our ignorance; it is ever ready to pounce upon the latest rage. Radiation and pollution evoke mindless terror in our chests. Stresses of modern society provide the pickings for vultures out to flatten our wallets. Who among us doesn't suffer fatigue, anxiety, back pains, sleeplessness, and the whole salad bowl of symptoms all assignable to the stress monster? The purveyor of perfect health is there at the counter to offer a pill to swallow or a poultice to swaddle our troubles.

Is there help? Is there hope? Yes, but it doesn't have the tantalizing allure of the local duck. The corner quack offers hope -- even certainty. The corner pharmacist offers strong stuff with often powerful side effects and no miracles.

If you want information, subscribe to the National Council Against Health Fraud (NCAHF) newsletter, (\$15 per year) Box 1276, Loma Linda, CA 92354, or check out "The Health Robbers," by Dr. Stephen Barrett and "Health Quackery" by the editors of "Consumer Reports".

(Mrs. Hammond is a concerned and cautious mother who follows the health scene carefully through the trials of four children.)

TAHOE TESSIE

We Californians feel slighted when we are not in the thick of most newsworthy droppings. The Northwest has its Sasquatch, the Hymalayas have their Yeti, and Scotland has her Nessie. We cannot stand the deprivation of the best cryptozoology has to offer.

Well, consider a list of famous California lakes, select those that are very deep -- especially if volcanic in origin, apply another filter to select those in a high tourist trade area and what do you have? More tourist trade. At least that seems to be the motive of Lake Tahoe promoter Bob McCormick, who in 1984 helped establish a "USO Hotline" -- Unidentified Swimming Objects -- to help track the 17-foot, humpbacked creature reported cruising the lake.

"Something's out there in the lake. There's no question about that," said one venerable Tahoe resident in an interview with a reporter from "IMAGE" magazine.

Some of the locals "on the inside" leaked revelations that "the South Tahoe Marketing Council has locked up motion picture footage of the thing and refused to show it because South Shore tourism czars don't want their lucrative lake associated with something large and scaly." Maybe the same kind of fear is why visitors have been staying away in droves from Loch Ness all these years.

What are the real wonders of the "bottomless" Lake Tahoe? Well, for starters, it is a wonder that the bottomless stuff persists more than

100 years after the measurement at the deepest point was made (1,645 feet) -- "with a champagne bottle lowered on a fishing line." The lake is alleged to have its bottomless bottom littered with corpses and the wrecks of many boats and airplanes. True, the 40 degree water is unforgiving to those unfortunate souls who tumble in, and corpses have a way of not crawling off the bottom, to be a little macabre.

All this just goes to prove that the Golden State is not to be outdone by anyone or anything. From the Napa institute holding Charlie Manson to Hollywood, we got it all, folks.

THE END -- MAYBE

How does it feel to live in the rapture? It was to start on September 12 if former NASA rocket engineer Edgar Whisenant is right. Jesus was supposed to "catch up" the faithful into heaven prior to the Second Coming, according to a complex set of numerological predictions Whisenant wove together from the Bible.

The Scriptures through the eyes of Whisenant reveal that the world-wide, eschatological incident had to occur at the onset of this year's Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, because this year it is four 30-day months after the 40th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel. It remained to the prophetic vision of Whisenant to see the great significance in this.

Many of the faithful in fundamentalist Christendom prepared themselves to be taken from the earth to be spared the seven-year tribulation during which the unsaved bear the stripes of the Lord's vengeance.

The booklet, "88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in '88", is published and distributed by the "On Borrowed Time" organization in Santa Rosa, CA. They say that 6.5 million copies have been sold or given away. As the sun rose Tuesday morning, the phone didn't stop ringing at the headquarters. Stephen Brodt, an organization spokesman said by telephone that the latest indications were that sunset in Jerusalem was the likely time for the calling. "It's very serious," he said to his caller. "You may call back, but I doubt we will be here in six hours."

The faithful soon began to realize that the Bible had not been talking about Jerusalem after all at the close of the day on the 12th, and that "the Lord is dealing with the United States now; He's looking at United-States time," said Jerry McLamb, a dedicated follower from North Carolina.

As we unwashed looked in at this spectacle, wondering how the zanies would wipe the egg of their faces, someone called the On Borrowed Time headquarters to report he had seen the face of Jesus in a TV picture of hurricane Gilbert on CNN -- it was clearly discernible. Sure enough, the pious all over the place confirmed the reality when word got around. Jesus hadn't disappointed the flock after all.

A call to the McLamb residence on Wednesday by some secular reporters found that he had gone to work at his auto repair shop. There was some muffled gibberish about a solar eclipse in Jerusalem that had delayed the whole affair, and McLamb assured the doubters that "It makes no difference if Whisenant's calculations were in error. I will be looking for it to happen any time."

If the rapture did occur, and you didn't notice your fundamentalist Christian friends riding their chariots to heaven, it may only mean that they were not faithful enough.

Edgar Whisenant himself is unavailable for comment.

RAMPARTS

(Ramparts is a regular feature of "BASIS," and your participation is urged. Clip, snip and tear bits of irrationality from your local scene and send them to the Editor. If you want to add some comment with the submission, please do so.)

A recent "S. F. Chron" article proves that negative publicity is better than the best Madison Avenue can muster.

A French doctor, Marcel Diennet, invented a diet pill with a new wrinkle: they are "herbal." That's sure to catch the health-conscious tubby by the eye, especially since you don't have to sweat or shun some of the things you love except alcohol and sweets (what else is left?).

So what's the negative? Eh bien, the FDA found some potentially harmful prescription drugs in the concoction, and have banned sale of the product in the US. But that only increased the orders, and, at \$430 for a three-month's supply, you might wonder if you are in the wrong business. And business is brisk -- about 2,000 calls a day.

Why do people buy the product? It has been "an incredible fad" among the Beverly Hills clientele. They say it works. Analyses show the active agents are appetite suppressants, sedatives, and anti-anxiety potions.

But if the stuff is herbal it has to be good. Isn't the paralysis-inducing drug curare derived from an herb?

Scanning some of the new titles just out, the pace-setting New-Age bandwagon has attracted the likes of what we would hope to have been otherwise sane people. Stanford engineer Willis Harman has just published two tomes, "Global Mind Change, Insight Into the New Age: Scientific Inquiry Into Higher Consciousness," and "Insight Into the New Age: A Guide to Unlocking Your Human Potential."

True to the beleaguered cry of "foul" at the perceived persecutors of a new paradigm, Harman recalls the calumny suffered by Great Thinkers of the past, Copernicus, and, oh, you know all the rest of those in the "avant garde" who finally turned us around.

The "Chron" quotes Harman saying, "Yet the `knowledge basis' of science is `seriously incomplete and has mistakes in its basic assumptions.'" According to him, science ignores a "fundamental factor . . . that of human consciousness . . . together with the unconscious, the vast, uncharted realm that harbors intuition, the intellect, instincts, and our spiritual yearnings." If this constitutes Harman's explanation of how science is incomplete and where the mistakes are in its basic assumptions, Harman needs to reevaluate his basic education.

Harman further suggests that the real world "out there somewhere is simply a collective invention created by science that we all have been conditioned to believe."

It is one thing for an untutored public to believe that science is incomplete and deficient because it does not cover everything -- it is a sadder comment on the state of would-be scientists who cannot seem to understand that some areas of living do not fall within the venue of science. This goes to show what happens when an engineer jumps into psychology and thinks his or her training will serve well.

Harman's books are characterized as "a floodlight for science's blind spot." The activity of science takes place in laboratories. Harman has his floodlight on out in the parking lot at noon on Sunday.

Another unlikely candidate for New Ageism, Barbara Brennan, looking very much unlike the NASA atmospheric physicist that she is, folded her bangle-decked hands under her chin as a beautiful, sparkling smile graced her striking visage. She glowed as she described her just-published book, "Hands of Light", a workbook for psychic healers. The book begins with "an introduction to chakras, auras and energy fields and the scientific evidence [she] has collected to prove that laying on of hands and `spiritual surgery' work."

For those who have studied some physics, it is a mystery how Brennan can speak about "energy fields right into internal organs" (she sees auras around her fingers). Since we are able to measure forces that act in the range of 10 to the minus 28th meters it is surprising that we can't seem to detect this "energy" allegedly surrounding our organs with the most sophisticated instruments while Ms. Brennan "sees" it with her naked eye.

Well, perhaps Brennan's own bio give us hope that there is some explanation for her lapses. As is often the case, when an expert in one area slips off the boat into strange waters, she thinks she knows how to swim. Brennan left NASA twenty years ago to have a baby. When she began meditating she experienced "these funny visions."

Instead of going into therapy, she began practicing it. (It is said that the best way to learn something is to teach it!) She could see colors surrounding people's heads and she soon learned to correlate people's problems with these colors. Formal study was now in order -- but those stuffy science classes, where researchers won't buy something unless it is properly demonstrated, were eschewed. No, Barbara Ann opted for the "Institute for Psychophysical Synthesis and the Core Energetic Process." After establishing her own practice, she published her book herself, charging \$50 apiece. She recovered her investment in four months and then Bantam Books came along. You can get the book anyplace, now.

(We are indebted to BAS Secretary Rick Moen for the wire news reports on these books.)

Flash! Flash! Lotto losers! Now, at last, we are going to let you know why you lose, thanks to John Taube's alert eye on the "Chron".

Part of your problem has been that you thought this whole thing is subject to mere chance and that you have only about a one in 40 million shot. Not so. Even if you promised God you would be eternally grateful if He let you win.

According to Zen masters, "your mind was consumed with an impure thought -- consumed, that is to say, with `komonbabi', or gambling lust." And "you will never win until you transcend your `komonbabi'." Here's how it works. "The clerk adversely reacts to your `karma' as he summons your Quick Pick numbers on the Lotto machine. The Lotto machine, resonating to his negatively charged fingertips, spews out six impure -- losing -- numbers."

"BASIS" has a solution. Purge all that nasty greed clogging up your soul by meditating, chanting and sending \$100 per month to THE EDITOR (address is on the front -- do not send to the main BAS address). It will probably take about nine months before your system is entirely clean. The final test of your innocence comes when you peddle up to the nearest Seven-Eleven store to get the winning ticket. If your temples are pounding as you put your dollar on the counter you've a way to go. Even after overcoming that and sweaty palms, the ultimate test comes when you put the ticket in the mail to "BASIS, THE EDITOR." If you have palpitations and nausea, your "chakras" are telling you victory is not yet yours.

Dear KPIX:

BAS co-founder Robert Sheaffer is well known and respected in the Bay Area for his UFO knowledge. He has appeared on many radio and television programs when "another viewpoint" is needed. When Whitley Strieber was on a west-coast promotional tour for his latest book, "Transformation", KPIX channel 5 in San Francisco had him booked, so

they called on Robert to balance the scheduled one-hour program. I taped the show so I could watch Sheaffer disassemble Streiber. Imagine my surprise and great disappointment when, of the entire hour, Robert had a grand total of three minutes 15 seconds! Half of that was because he forced in a sentence here and there, mostly there. Robert's article on page 2 tells what happened behind the cameras. I wrote to KPIX in protest to the shabby treatment Sheaffer received. -- Ed.

KPIX Channel 5
San Francisco, CA
Dear Producer:

Thank you very much for trying to balance the Whitney Shrieber appearance by having an expert with a counter view. The problem was that Mr. Robert Sheaffer's presence was apparently only for stage decoration -- even his very presence seemed to be in question because the camera wanted to avoid him. A man in the audience was accorded more time.

And what kind of cogent questions were directed to Mr. Sheaffer? "You DO believe that men have landed on the moon, don't you?"

Robert Sheaffer is an internationally recognized UFO expert. He has spent years investigating some of the most famous UFO cases. He knows the literature, the people, and just about every other aspect associated with UFO phenomena. He is an accomplished author and has talked directly with some of the foremost principals in "UFOlogy." With all due respect, neither Ross nor Ann [show hosts] has the experience necessary in this area to direct the kind of pointed questions that would have provided some very interesting dialogue, with emphasis on the "di."

Mr. Strieber makes some extraordinary claims. He cannot play off to your sympathies by complaining about skepticism of those claims. His most unusual declarations demand explanation, and the public has every right to see that he stand and take the heat. He is being handsomely paid for his time because his appearance will sell many of his books. By contrast, Robert Sheaffer took his own time off work not to mention the effort in preparation for this encounter which turned out to be more like one of "first kind."

Again, thank you for your attempt at fairness. I hope that the next time there will be more real balance. I think you owe it to the community.

Kent Harker,
Editor, "BASIS"

"Delight in deceiving and aptness to be deceived, imposture and credulity, although they appear to be of a diverse nature, yet certainly they do for the most part concur." -- Bacon

SEN. PELL MEETS URI

Sen. Claiborne Pell is Washington's best-known advocate of psychic phenomena. He is so enthusiastic he has hired a staffer, Scott Jones, to help promote his beliefs routinely and legislatively. Jones works to "make federal officials receptive to research in the field." Then, after hours, Jones actively runs "a one-man organization devoted to studying anomalous phenomena and interest in UFOs," reports the "Providence Sunday Journal".

The military has shown interest in psychic warfare, especially since we hear all this talk about how the Soviets are years ahead of us -- that they are able to snoop psychically and use psychokinesis (PK) to wreak havoc in our submarine fleet. We may breathe a little easier since learning that Pentagon officials hired the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to evaluate whether such skills "might be helpful in creating more proficient soldiers." The study concluded that "the U.S. probably does not have to worry about claims by some parapsychologists that the Soviet Union is far ahead in the psychic-arms race. . . ."

For Pell's part, he invited some of the luminaries of psychicdom to the Hill where they could give first-hand demonstrations to his scoffing colleagues. He'd show them. And who better than THE most powerful, Uri?

Geller's ho-hum routines impress Pell, but apparently didn't move any mountains otherwise.

Dr. Ray Hyman, chief CSICOP investigator raised some monetary questions about the extent of Pell's activities, finding that the senator was working very hard to establish a kind of "top-secret Manhattan Project" in response to alleged Soviet advances. Pell at first "declined to say whether he had tried to influence the Pentagon" until he was informed of Hyman's investigations. He responded that "the [allegations] are `correct but vastly exaggerated.'"

How does the senator, sixth-ranking in the Senate in seniority and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, view the tarnished Israeli, Geller? "I sort of feel that he's for real. I have seen no evidence of cheating during Geller's performance in Washington." Pell acknowledges that Geller may cheat on occasion. "Geller was a magician when he was younger," Pell said. "Maybe when his intuitive processes fail, he can back them up with sleight of hand."

James Randi had something to say about that in a direct confrontation with Pell in which Pell challenged Randi to "duplicate Geller's ability to reproduce a drawing made secretly by the senator."

After Randi succeeded, Pell recanted, right?

"I think maybe Randi's a psychic and doesn't realize it," the unflappable Solon responded.

Claiborne tumbled pell-mell down the hill, but he just dusted himself off as if nothing happened.

How true it is that a believer cannot be dissuaded from his or her folly, no matter how powerful the confutation.

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