

The Conspiratorial Superhighway

by David Bloomberg
"Paranoia strikes deep
Into your heart it will creep
It starts when you're always afraid
Step out of line, the Man comes, and take you away."

-- "For What It's Worth"
Buffalo Springfield

"Anytime,
Or anywhere
Just look over your shoulder
'Cus we'll be standing there"

-- "(Theme From) The Monkees"
The Monkees

As I have read various conversations on discussion conferences around the computer nets, I have run into an awful lot of conspiracy theories. Ah, the conspiracy theory. The conspiracy theory is catching up on baseball as the great American pastime (and conspiracies never go on strike). We are inundated by them. The most famous have had numerous books written about them, almost all seeming to contradict one another. Who was responsible for the assassination of John F. Kennedy? Who killed Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.? Who shot J.R.?

Also increasing in popularity are conspiracies which link the UFO phenomenon to anything and everything, including some or all of the above. The best conspiracies can take any piece of information and incorporate it as part of the theory. You don't have any evidence linking the CIA to your speeding ticket? That's just because they were very clever and concealed their activities! Some in the UFO field are fond of the statement: "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." However, some have, in deed if not in words, altered this to: "Absence of evidence is evidence of conspiracy." When skeptics demand hard, physical evidence of alien abductions, crashed saucers, etc. (or, as Carl Sagan has indicated, an alien ashtray), we are often told that we know darned well that the government has confiscated all the evidence. For a government which screws up so often in everyday affairs, it really does a good job of grabbing every last scrap of evidence following the flying saucer crashes that seem to occur with alarming frequency nowadays (do you have the UFO-crash rider on your home insurance policy?).

So why is the conspiracy such an integral part of UFOlogy today? For the exact reason that there is such an absence of evidence. Those involved, many of whom have dedicated far too many hours and dollars to simply give up when faced by this amazing lack of evidence, need a reason to explain it (unless you're a follower of John Mack and apparently don't care about evidence but simply brush away science as an outdated Western philosophy, but that's another story). This need has been combined with the early Cold War secrecy of the government, when UFOs started gaining popularity, to come up with the perfect match. According to many, the government wasn't trying to hide our secrets from the Soviets, they were trying to hide alien secrets from us!

Let's get one thing out of the way right now: Does the government lie? Hell yes! In some cases, there are valid reasons (what's the point of having a super-secret plane if they give out its specs to the first person to ask about it?), and in some cases, the reasons seem pretty idiotic (that can be said about just about anything the government does). Does this mean that the U.S. is controlled by the Illuminati, Trilateral Commission, Bildebergers, Council on Foreign Relations, and/or Grey aliens? Only to those with very creative imaginations and/or those influenced by paranoia.

Paranoia is often, if not always, an integral part of any conspiracy. They are out to get me. They control the media. They control the citizens through subliminal messages sent out through TV and radio broadcasts, and that's why so many people won't believe me. They are responsible for anything bad which happens to me.

I'm not saying that everybody who believes these stories is paranoid, but I've heard that some of them have stopped watching football games because they got so upset when the players would get together between plays and talk about them.

But enough of the generalities. You want specifics! Let me preface it with a little information which you'll need to know:

I operate a computer bulletin board service (BBS) and participate on a number of skeptic, UFO, and paranormal-related conferences which are distributed all around the world. In fact, I am the Moderator of the SKEPTIC conference and was the Assistant Moderator of the UFO conference (until I got sick of re-explaining the same information to believers over and over again), among other activities on FidoNet, the world's largest hobby BBS network. Much of the information here about UFO conspiracies was obtained through FidoNet.

As a known skeptic on these conferences, I have been associated with a variety of conspiracies, as have other skeptics. When I was made the Assistant Moderator of the UFO area (the first skeptic -- or rather, horrible evil "skeptibunker" -- in such a position), the conspiracies really started to fly. I have been accused of censoring information, being a government disinformation agent, and being on the "alien payroll." (Where can I cash these Venusian dollars?!)

But that's just a small part of it. Other skeptics have been associated with even greater conspiracies. In fact, one conspiracy even has two sub-factions. Some think the skeptic, who I'll call Curly*, does not exist, but is actually a name used by a number of government agents throughout the country, who use the network to spread disinformation about UFOs (see below). The other group thinks he is actually Philip J. Klass (as am I, according to this faction).

What goes through the minds of these people to make them come to such strange conclusions? I can honestly (and, perhaps, thankfully) say that I have no idea. Some simply cannot seem to understand that it is possible to be interested in the UFO and alien abduction claims without actually believing them. Therefore, they have to create a reason for the existence of these skeptics. That reason then merges with the government conspiracy theory to create "government disinformation agents."

These agents, they would have us believe, come in several varieties. Some are the skeptics, like me, the guy mentioned earlier, or Phil Klass, who spend time talking about these subjects and why we don't think people should stay up nights worrying that aliens may come down and perform sexual experiments on them. The other kind of disinformation agents, according to the conspiracists, pretend to be believers in alien spaceships and the like, but they make wild claims and generally bring negative publicity to UFO groups. I still have not figured out how to tell these people from the conspiracists themselves, but they apparently have their ways, which appear to consist of whether or not a given person agrees with a given conspiracist on a given issue.

Now for the meat. What are some of the wildest claims these people have to offer? I'm not talking about MJ-12, the documents which are supposed to show that there is a secret government group which deals with aliens -- and which have been thoroughly debunked by Klass and others. No, I'm talking about some of the stuff I see proposed -- in total seriousness -- by people who think they are among the very few with the Truth.

Let's start with Gwen**, a frequent contributor of messages to a number of UFO-related computer conferences, and creator of an anti-skeptic UFO conference. To go into all of the details of the religion of conspiracy she has built around UFOs would take up the rest of this year's newsletter pages (for example, she thinks Jesus was a time-traveling alien). Because of this, her conspiracy theories extend beyond the country and even the planet. She doesn't think the Jupiter-comet collision was a natural occurrence. Specifically, she said, "why collide with Jupiter? I mean it is like they were intentionally AIMED at Jupiter. Something's up with this." (Emphasis in original.)

That same day, she informed everybody that "the 4th Dimensional Hierarchy have officially RESIGNED to the GALACTIC FEDERATION, releasing their grip on the WORLD POWER GRID." (Emphasis in original.) She added that "Your heart chakra and solar plexus will be receiving all this ascension information, as we the ASHTAR COMMAND have full connection to your receiving energetic field through these two areas mainly. So do the REBEL ELITE FORCES have this focus but they on the other hand are finding it more difficult to focus on their hold as the minutes pass by; natural law (light information) must be EMBRACED by everything." (Emphasis in original.) Apparently, the good guys are winning, because by the end of the month, she reported that, "The greys and the hierarchy of secret govts. have lost their power." Phew! I was getting worried there! I might have been even more worried if I had some idea what the heck she was talking about.

In case you were thinking that this cosmic battle might not affect us directly, Gwen has suggested that information she has seen "makes the Cold War seem to be fake and a propaganda tool." Now that must be one heck of a conspiracy! But then, the Ashtar Command is involved, so I guess that pretty much explains everything.

Gwen, along with a number of her friends, really doesn't like skeptics. We keep doing these annoying things like asking for evidence. She wants no part of that. She has proposed that we all simply accept that UFOs are alien craft and go from there. In other words, her conspiracies stem from a religious belief system which is not open to question. This is even better than a standard conspiracy, in that those in control have godlike powers. A good conspiracy, as I've mentioned, can meld any fact or absence of fact into it. A GOD conspiracy can simply use supernatural means in such a way that facts, or the absence thereof, are simply irrelevant.

In a similar vein, we have Will**. Nothing I can say about Will's beliefs can do them justice, so I will simply let him speak for himself:

"Some of the Creator Gods wanted man to evolve as a God. Others did not! The controversy became heated and created conflict for many thousands of years. So great was this conflict, Wars became prevalent across the Earth. The side that eventually won did not want man to understand his origins. This is where we stand today. The other side having lost is now returning to set man free and give him his place in the Stars."

There's the religious part. Now, for the part getting back to UFOs and our government:

"The above is the reason for disinformation on extraterrestrials and the refusal to release the truth hidden in our history revealing what and who controls this planet and why."

He has stated outright that "Aliens rule this planet" using "Secret governments run by the filthy rich." "The TRUTH is opposite to what they want you to believe. ... People like [William] Cooper get their reputations discredited... Watch those being discredit! (sic)" (Emphasis in original.) Of course, the only way to find out the real truth is to join him and those who have been discredited. Contrary to a rational course of action, in which discredited people would lose their followers, in this case we should follow those people when evidence is used to discredit them. The conspiracy wins again.

Lest the reader think the only ones who believe in these ideas are a couple of far-out wackos who nobody listens to anyway, I bring you to the case of Dr. Robert. Dr. Robert is a therapist and author who specializes in "alien abductions." My first encounter with him was when he wrote a message saying that he was leaving the UFO conference because he had to go into hiding. A couple weeks later, he came back, with little explanation. Soon after that, he was publicly accused (in a lawsuit and newspaper article) of improper conduct with several of his patients (he later lost his license to practice because of these accusations). Almost immediately, the accusations became part of the conspiracy against him. After all, he had told us that They were after him, right?

"Some of my harassment is ongoing, and involves both dirty tricks and legal process, on which I cannot comment at this time upon advice of my attorneys. ... the Dark Forces have turned up the pressure on me to the extreme setting. Trying to discredit me, so that what I tell about will not matter."

On a radio show, he was asked if the lawsuit had anything to do with his views on aliens. He responded, "Oh, very

much. That's exactly, you know, what it's about, and without again trying to follow my attorney's advice not to get into the particulars. (sic) I think probably the best anecdote is one of my fellow UFO researchers said to me, 'well [Robert], you must be getting too close to the truth because they're trying to do the smear stuff on you.'

Of course, the lawsuit is not the only way the government is going after him. He believes They are tapping him. He knows "remote viewers" (people who use ESP to scan the area, apparently) who warned him that an "intercept team, armed and dangerous" was waiting for him at a location he planned to visit. Once again, if there was a huge government conspiracy with the control he thinks they have after him, and they really wanted him dead, couldn't they get it done -- at least if this group is as successful as he claims at all the other conspiratorial stuff they do?

In addition, Dr. Robert is among those who think the skeptic mentioned earlier is not who he appears to be. Specifically, he said, "The team that take turns playing '[Curly]' are a bunch of gutless wonders, afraid to use their own real names.***"

And, of course, the government doesn't just restrain itself to trying to kill him, sue him, or annoy him on the computer. He also thinks They are trying to ruin his work with people who claim alien abductions. He said that some of the people who come to him with these claims fall into the "category of what appeared to me in my opinion to be plants from 'military and intelligence,' who were coming in trying to muddy-up what I'm doing by planting preposterous stories with me hoping I'll bite on them, and announce them, and sound so absolutely goofy that my research will not be taken seriously." Remember that second category of disinformation agents involved in conspiracies? Considering some of the tales Robert has told, I can't honestly figure out how anybody could discredit him further!

Just what are some of those claims, I hear you ask. Well, let's start with: "In my research to date, I've come up with a minimum of seven different races [of aliens] and possibly more." and "I would estimate that there's probably three thousand extraterrestrial contacts going on a day in the United States." What could the government possibly do to make his claims any more outrageous?

But the government isn't just after him. They're after all of us, in a way. They want us to think that the aliens are evil, even though Robert thinks they are good: "My frank opinion is that the negative stereotyping is part of the organized cover up of the extraterrestrial presence and UFO presence phenomenon." And if promoting a negative image for aliens isn't enough: "It appears that [some abductions] are psychological warfare operations designed to enhance the image of extraterrestrial contact as a horrible experience that people should fear". So the government is actually participating in some of them, according to him!

I must remind the reader now, this man is not just some loon who spouts nuttiness over the computer. He claims to have counseled 98 people in alien-abduction-related work, he was a licensed psychologist, and has an impressive-looking resume. His conspiracies have a direct effect on the lives of those he counsels!

I could go on (and on and on and...), but I think the point is clear: Some people are going to believe no matter how little evidence exists, and in some cases the lack of evidence only encourages them to believe further. Can we, as skeptics, do anything about it? No and yes. No, we probably won't have much, if any, luck in trying to convince those people pushing these "theories" that they are wrong in either their actions or conclusions. As I pointed out, a good conspiracy theory can incorporate anything into it, even directly contradictory evidence. But, yes, we can prevent others from falling for their nonsense. There are people out there who are neither "believers" or "skeptics." They may just be interested in the claims and begin looking around for more information. By giving them this information, we can convince at least some of them to be more skeptical about UFO-related claims in the future.

Don't get the idea that everybody involved in UFOlogy or BBSes are as far out as the people I've mentioned here. While most "believers" do think the government is hiding something (for example, the Roswell crash is still a hot issue, and may be until the end of time), their credulity covers a wide range from almost entirely skeptical to, well, the people I've mentioned here. Believers argue amongst themselves at least as much as they argue with skeptics (remember that second class of "disinformation agent"). There seems to be no single case that all of them can point to and say, "There it is. Proof that we are being visited by alien beings." However, there seem to be an infinite number of cases for which they say, "We would have the evidence, if only it weren't for..."

* The skeptic in question has asked that I not use his real name here. He gets enough crank calls as it is.

** I have decided not to use the real names of these three people. Several of them have threatened lawsuits in the past, and, frankly, I don't have either the time or money to fight a frivolous lawsuit.

** Contrary to Dr. Robert's claims, "Curly" does use his real name on the nets. See above comment.

Thinking and the Paranormal

by Henry Gordon

Editor's Note: Henry Gordon, a CSICOP fellow and head of the Ontario Skeptics, wrote this piece nearly a decade ago, and his call for courses in critical thinking is just as relevant today.

The potential problems facing humankind in the next century are, of course, too numerous to mention. It seems to me that the most important factor to consider is the capability of the human brain to cope with the various issues as they develop -- which brings us to the basic problem: Can men and women learn to think rationally and critically and make judgments based on objective and logical assessments?

We have only to look at the area of belief in the paranormal to realize that we are a long, long way from the utopian state. Every poll taken in recent years, whether in our universities or among the general public, has indicated that a large percentage of the population accepts the validity of astrology, extrasensory perception, UFO visitations, channeling, and all the other nonsensical claims.

We have made tremendous advances in science and technology in the last several decades. But it is quite evident that, as far as superstition-based beliefs are concerned, man's mind has never shifted out of first gear.

As long as these irrational beliefs are passed along from one generation to the next -- and they are -- the human thinking apparatus will not develop to the extent necessary to deal with upcoming problems. It is paradoxical that our young people are being taught the sophisticated intricacies of modern technology but are still unable to distinguish the difference between science and pseudoscience. These are the people who will be shaping the world of tomorrow. They, and their children, are the ones who will have to cope with the environmental, economic, and human problems we have inconsiderately bequeathed them. Our problem, right now, is to decide how we can help them learn and apply the art of critical thinking. How? There is really only one vehicle: through the educational system. Beginning in the secondary schools, the curriculum should include a course on the subject of critical thinking -- no matter how brief. But these skills can be developed further in the colleges and universities. The results would be quite dramatic.

It has been said that the establishment probably frowns on this concept -- why educate masses to be too critical? We must combat this awful cynicism. Why admit defeat before making a strong attempt to sell the idea?

Keep in mind that the willingness to accept outrageous claims is not confined to those who are stupid, unbalanced, or uneducated. The number of educated, literate, and intelligent people who believe in paranormal phenomena is surprisingly high. One could list any number of celebrated authors, scientists, inventors, industrialists, artists, politicians -- going back 150 years -- who accepted and supported the belief in ghosts, in spiritualism, and in every kind of supernatural occurrence. Evidently they never attended courses in critical thinking. You may say that many of them lived in a different age. No matter. There are just as many, if not more, of these high-profile people in our enlightened and sophisticated age.

Whenever I sit on a panel that includes psychics or other purveyors of the paranormal -- in a television studio or on the lecture platform -- I scan the audience, most of whom are usually believers. One thought keeps occurring to me: These are the people who elect the legislative and administrative officials whose decisions direct our globe.

It's a sobering thought.

Extra-Sensory Perception Fact Sheet

Prepared by the North Texas Skeptics

Many believe there are some people ("sensitives" or "psychics") who can receive the thoughts of others, and even transmit their own thoughts to others. This direct mind-to-mind communication is often said to be instantaneous and independent of distance. Proponents sometimes claim all people have this ability to some degree, and that this explains many curious events in daily life, such as apparently pre-cognitive dreams. The catch-all term for this alleged ability is extra-sensory perception, or ESP (sometimes called "psi," like the Greek letter). Parapsychology is the term used for the serious study of such claims. So far, parapsychology seems to be a science that cannot even demonstrate that its subject matter exists, let alone offer explanations for it.

The claims for ESP fall into four general categories:

Telepathy -- a person's awareness of another's thoughts, without any communication through normal sensory channels.

Clairvoyance -- knowledge acquired of an object or event without the use of the senses.

Precognition -- knowledge a person may have of another person's future thoughts, or of future events.

Psychokinesis -- a person's ability to influence a physical object or an event, by merely thinking about it. (Some researchers consider psychokinesis a part of psi, but not strictly extra-sensory "perception").

The evidence cited for ESP is usually anecdotal. Sometimes it is claimed, however, that scientific tests at respected research institutions have conclusively demonstrated that ESP exists; or government tests have proved it; or, that the Russians are "working hard" on it, etc. Sometimes proponents cite specific experiments as having confirmed the existence of ESP. In fact, it is the essentially unanimous opinion of psychologists that the existence of ESP has not been shown. All procedurally valid and reproducible experiments have failed to demonstrate the existence of ESP.

(See Hansel, Alcock, Marks and Kammann, and Druckman and Swets for detailed reviews of the best-known experiments.) We will first consider why the existence of ESP is such an extraordinary claim, given the current state of our knowledge about the world, and then review the major experiments claimed to support the existence of ESP. The inconsistency of ESP claims and scientific knowledge

Questions can be raised about every aspect of ESP. The existence of ESP ability in humans (or animals, for that matter) would not be consistent with anything we know about nature -- either from the standpoint of physics or of human physiology. Let's consider the physiological aspects first.

All the higher animals show the same fundamental organization of their sensory systems. The specialized cells (neurons) that form the central nervous system (CNS) of man and other higher animals are themselves insensitive to sensory stimuli. For each kind of important stimulus in the environment, animals have evolved highly specialized sensory organs. Each such sense organ contains unique, highly adapted cells that are sometimes called "transducers". Each stimulus in the environment involves a special kind of cellular activity. Vision involves direct detection of particles of light (photons). Hearing involves direct detection of organized wave motion of air molecules. Smell and taste involve direct detection of molecular shapes. Sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose) support the cells specialized to detect photons, molecular motion, and molecular shapes directly. These cells generate impulses that travel along nerve fibers and which are then processed in intermediate switching and coding areas, finally reaching the brain in a form that the brain can interpret.

The brain itself is insensitive to sensory information. If one opened a skull and exposed the living brain to light, sound, heat, smells, etc., the brain would be totally unaware of the application of these stimuli directly to its tissues. For obvious reasons, the sensory organs containing the transducers cells are located at or near the surface of the body in all animals, including humans. When we apply this universal rule of nature about informational input into the brain to claims for telepathy, we come up short on all accounts. Assume that a person's brain radiates some kind of "something" as she thinks. How would another person's brain ever know about it? Nowhere on the surface of the body is there a

specialized organ that appears to lack a function, and which contains transducer cells sensitive to "unknown forces". Nor, contrary to popular myth, is there any large area of the brain whose function is unknown, and which might be responsible for reception and interpretation of signals from the hypothetical ESP organ.

Furthermore, in the course of evolution many kinds of animals have developed extremely acute senses of one kind or another (i.e., compared to those of humans). Dogs have much more highly developed sense of smell than do humans; hawks and eagles, more acute eyesight; bats, much wider range of hearing, etc. Where is the animal that has a much more highly developed ESP sense than humans? The ability to sense the presence of predatory animals that could not have been seen, heard, or smelled would confer such enormous advantages for its possessors that evolution should have made ESP as common as fur, claws, and moist noses. It has not happened. Could it be that no such sense organ exists because there is no stimulus for the organ to detect?

Some persons argue that only human beings are capable of ESP communication; or, that only certain, special persons are so endowed. Comparative anatomy fails to show any evidence for the former contention. There is no information concerning the second notion.

A proponent of ESP could argue that telepathy differs from all other senses in that the brain itself is the telepathic sense organ. In this case the detected stimulus would require the penetrating power of x-rays or nuclear radioactivity in order to get through the skull to reach the brain! This brings us to the realm of physics, where ESP falls down as badly as in the realm of physiology.

Physicists have found, in 400 years of searching, only four fundamental forces in nature: gravity, electromagnetic force, and the strong and weak nuclear forces. All interactions between one bit of matter and another can be understood and precisely described in terms of just these four forces. Because these are now well understood, we know none of them could be responsible for the hypothetical ESP stimuli. What then, about a new force, unknown to science? A force sufficient to account for ESP is almost certain not to exist for the same reason that you can be fairly certain that there is no elephant in the room with you as you read this. There is not any room for it! If such a force existed, everything would be different from how we now see it, because the force would affect everything in some way. (To claim that it would have no observable effect is equivalent to claiming that it does not exist). Furthermore, all interactions in physics diminish as the inverse square of the distance between the interacting objects (or even more rapidly than that). All these interactions propagate at or below the speed of light. Proponents, in effect, say ESP violates these universal laws.

This brings us to another point that is seldom understood by proponents of ESP. We know electromagnetic radiation exists over a vast range of frequencies and wavelengths that we are blind to because we have no sensory organs that will detect such radiation. Our knowledge of the existence of such radiation does not depend upon the accidental birth of "sensitives" who are somehow able to detect radio waves directly. No one can detect these waves directly; there are no sensory organs for them in any animal. We build mechanical transmitters and detectors for radio waves; we can build them to be as sensitive and flexible as we wish.

If ESP radiation existed, the questions of whether or not humans could detect it would be irrelevant. It could be studied far more precisely and carefully with sensitive scientific instruments than it could with human beings who are easily fatigued and often moody. Yet believers in ESP never try to use such instruments. Could it be that the signals sought do not exist except in the minds of certain people who have been conditioned to believe that something should come through such channels? It is a characteristic of all pseudoscience, not just ESP studies, that no actual physical process ever is uncovered or studied. What is usually studied are the unverified, anecdotal claims of Madam Whiffle, the medium, or Uri Geller, the Israeli stage magician, or Aunt Tillie who remembers this funny thing that once happened to her.

Instead of looking for ESP in the universe of real phenomena, ESP believers tend to look in the same old places: in stories about how Aunt Maude "just knew" Uncle Bruce was in trouble, and sure enough, he was in jail; or in games of guessing playing cards in which any amateur magician can score highly using nothing but subtly disguised sensory perception. But anecdotes and parlor games are not experiments. What have been the results when persons allegedly showing ESP ability are tested under proper scientific protocols?

The experimental evidence for ESP

The experimental problem for ESP research is that even its proponents concede there is no clear and affirmative evidence for its existence. Rather, the existence of ESP has come to be defined negatively, as the absence of any alternative explanation for a statistical departure from a chance baseline. Subjects tested for ESP ability are typically asked to guess the outcome of random events under conditions where they should have no sensory knowledge of the actual event. Accurate data collection, elimination of experimenter bias, adequate randomization, proper controls and correct statistical analysis thus become critical. The major ESP studies have still not met these minimal criteria:

The Rhine Experiments: Joseph Banks Rhine, a botanist at Duke University, conducted ESP experiments in the 1930's. Rhine made the "ESP cards" famous by his use of them in guessing experiments. Rhine claimed in his 1934 book, *Extra-Sensory Perception*, to have found overwhelming evidence of ESP. However, other psychologists were unable to replicate his results, and it is now generally conceded that Rhine's experiments were poorly designed and allowed leakage of information between subject and tester.

The SRI remote-viewing experiments: In the 1970's, physicists Harold Puthoff and Russell Targ conducted experiments at SRI International that they claimed showed subjects could essentially "see" a remote place through the eyes of another person. The target team would randomly visit sites such as a shopping center or airport, while the experimenter asked the subject to describe his impressions.

Obviously, deciding whether the subject's impressions matched the target scene involved some subjective decisions.

Methodological flaws also plagued the research, and other experimenters were unable to replicate the results. As the National Research Council report puts it: "By both scientific and parapsychological standards, then, the case for remote viewing is not just very weak, but virtually nonexistent." (Druckman and Swets, p. 184).

Research on random-number generators: Electronic random-generators (RNG's) have been used in ESP research both to test clairvoyance or precognition, or, most commonly, to test the psychokinetic ability of a subject to mentally bias the output of an RNG so that it produces a non-random sequence. The latter would indeed be remarkable, given what we know about the laws of physics.

However, many of these experiments produce results in excess of chance expectation, so some effect is operating. From the point of view of the skeptics, all of the experiments are questionable because of the inadequacy of the randomization of the RNG outputs. That is, the random-number generator itself is not ideally random, and its bias must also be measured and taken into account. The National Research Council Report concludes that after 15 years of research, only one of hundreds of experiments met the minimal criteria of scientific acceptability, and that one experiment yielded results of just marginal significance.

The Ganzfeld experiments: These experiments are named after the term used by Gestalt psychologists to designate the entire visual field. Test subjects wear halves of ping-pong balls over their eyes while white noise plays in earphones. In this state of sensory deprivation, a sender attempts to psychically communicate a randomly selected target to the subject. The subject is later asked to match his perceptions to the targets. Ganzfeld experiments have probably been the most carefully conducted -- and carefully scrutinized -- of all ESP experiments. Still, the research has failed to produce results that convince psychologists that ESP exists.

In summary, the existence of ESP has not been demonstrated in either everyday life or the laboratory. Further, the claims for ESP run counter to well-established, well-tested laws of nature. To be consistent with the rules by which reality is regulated, ESP would require elaborate, highly specialized organs for sending and receiving ESP radiation -- organs that are not evident. The ESP radiation should be detectable directly and capable of study by sensitive instruments. Such instruments do not exist because such radiation does not exist in any recognizable form. The more closely ESP has been studied in the laboratory, the smaller the effects become. ESP, if it does exist, is plainly very weak. It is becoming more difficult for its proponents to distinguish between non-existence and an effect that is so vanishingly small that it could have no practical consequences.

[This fact sheet was written by John A. Thomas (jathomas@netcom.com). It is based on material originally written by

Prof. Rory Coker of the University of Texas at Austin and the Austin Society to Stop Pseudoscience.]
Suggested Reading:

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From the Editor

There are unforgettable lines from movies, such as Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry saying, "Go ahead, make my day." Or Peter Finch yelling in *Network*, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" Many of us probably wish we could have said those lines first.

Now, this year's best (and already trite) line is said by Cuba Gooding, Jr. in *Jerry Maguire*: "Show me the money!" Perhaps fellow skeptics should use this variation of that phrase whenever the paranormal or pseudoscientific assertions become prominent: "Show me the evidence!" Can you imagine the ripple effect of shouting out that phrase whenever outrageous claims are made? Perhaps that's only a fantasy, but it would be at least fun to think it.

In our big issue of the year, we include three features: David Bloomberg's personal look at the conspiracy theorists on the Net; a primer on ESP (and why there is no good evidence for its existence) prepared by another skeptics group; and a reprint of an article on critical thinking by CSICOP fellow Henry Gordon.

By the time you finish reading this issue, you may just want to stand up and yell: "Show me the evidence!"

P.S. Don't miss our exciting meeting on March 4 that features Bruce Walstad, a police officer who is an expert on street scams.

From the Chairman

As I mentioned last month, the speaker for our March meeting will be Investigator Bruce Walstad! For those of you who don't know him, Bruce is the president of Professionals Against Confidence Crime (an international police organization), chairman of the Occult Investigation Subcommittee of the Society of American Magicians, former member of the legal subcommittee for CSICOP, and a nationally known expert on psychics, fortune tellers, and other frauds and con artists, having appeared on numerous news and talk shows, ranging from Oprah to 48 Hours. He is also a professional magician, and part of his presentation will demonstrate some of the tricks used by con artists to separate people from their money. The meeting will be on Tuesday, March 4, at 7 p.m. in the Lincoln Library. Don't miss it!

I am working on getting future speakers and am always interested in suggestions. I am currently working on trying to get a series of people who work in the media, ranging from newspapers journalists to radio DJs to TV anchors. I'm hoping this will be an interesting and informative series of talks. More news will follow as it becomes available.

I am grateful to the North Texas Skeptics for allowing us to use their ESP Fact Sheet as an article for this issue. (Editor Bob thought this one was particularly appropriate, given that Bruce Walstad is our speaker this month.) Upcoming issues will feature two more such articles on graphology and astrology. I think these types of articles are great for giving a good background and factual information that we may use in debate situations (such as letters to the editor). Indeed, I would like to see REALL prepare such information to be used quickly should the need arise (though I certainly don't expect to be as in-depth as these are right away). Do I have any volunteers?

Well, that's about all I have to say this month. I do want to note that many of us have memberships that expire this month, so please check your mailing label. I hope we continue to get your support!

Sources of Recent Information....

by Bob Ladendorf

"Science News of the Year." Science News, Dec. 21 & 28, 1996, pp. 402-9. Presents highlights of the year in science in different fields. Also, the full text of the 1995-96 issues are available on CD-ROM. Call (800) 544-4565, or see: <http://www.sciencenews.org/> for more information.

"Mexican psychic admits burial of skeleton to frame Salinas kin." Chicago Tribune, Feb. 3, 1997, p. 8. Associated Press news story about the arrest of psychic Francisca Zetina, who admitted planting the bones of a relative on the ranch of the brother of ex-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The scheme to frame Raul Salinas de Gortari for the murder of a politician involved Zetina and seven others. Salinas is currently in prison on charges for that murder.

"Vital Signs: Research." The State Journal-Register, Jan. 27, 1997, p. 13. A quotation from the University of California Wellness Letter refers to the National Research Council report concluding that electromagnetic forces (EMFs) do not cause cancer.

"An Astronomer's Personal Statement on UFOs." Alan Hale. Skeptical Inquirer, March/April 1997, p. 29. An impassioned article by the co-discoverer of the Hale-Bopp comet provides a critical counterpoint to the pro-UFO believers. Hale emphasizes three basic principles when confronted with beliefs about UFOs and other paranormal phenomena:

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

The burden of proof is on the positive.

Occam's Razor: If one is confronted with a series of phenomena for which there exists more than one viable explanation, one should choose the simplest explanation which fits all the observed facts.

Hale is "open to the possibility" of life in outer space and emphasizes that, as a scientist, he is prepared intellectually and emotionally to meet other life forms -- and would be ecstatic.

"But again, I want the direct evidence for their existence; I want the aliens themselves," Hale says. "I don't want to hear stories about some 'thing' that some person somewhere might have seen."

Masthead Information

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Membership information is provided elsewhere in this newsletter.

Board of Directors: Chairman, David Bloomberg; Assistant Chairman, Prof. Ron Larkin; Secretary-Treasurer, Kevin Brown; Newsletter Editor, Bob Ladendorf; At-Large Members, Prof. Steve Egger, Wally Hartshorn, and Frank Mazo.

Editorial Board: Bob Ladendorf (Newsletter Editor), David Bloomberg, (one vacancy).

REALL

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A Nod to Our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. Patron members are those giving \$50 or more. To become a patron of REALL, please see the membership form. Patron members are:

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