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'Debunkers vs. UFO Menace' - Part 1

From: clark@canby.mn.frontiercomm.net [Jerry Clark]
Date: Sat, 21 Jun 1997 11:27:47 PDT
Fwd Date: Sat, 21 Jun 1997 14:06:39 -0400
Subject: 'Debunkers vs. UFO Menace' - Part 1

The Debunkers vs. the UFO Menace; or, Is Ufology
Tantamount to Communism?
by Jerome Clark
(written in 1992)

On August 23, 1983, an administrator at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln took a strange phone call from a man who had a complaint which he expressed at some length. When he finally got off the phone, the administrator summarized the conversation in a memo to another university official:

"Mr. Phillip [sic] Klass ... is a member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal [CSICOP]. This committee has a much different view of unexplained phenomena than those groups we are working with as sponsors of "this conference [titled Exploring Unexplained Phenomena]. He was, in fact, quite adamant [sic] in his position regarding the credibility of the conference presenters. Further, Mr. Klass has a personal feeling that the nature of this conference seriously questions the integrity of the United States Government. He feels that there is no scientific evidence to support the claims of the presenters and indicated that these organizations, by publicly questioning the government, lend support to the Communist movement."

All ufologists, of course, know who Philip J. Klass is. A Washington-based aerospace journalist, Klass is the world's best known (and, some would say, most obsessed) critic of UFO reports and ufologists, the author of books with self-explanatory titles as UFOs Explained, UFOs: The Public Deceived, and UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game -- all sacred texts of the debunking movement.

That same day the administrator phoned conference organizer Ray Boeche to inform him of the conversation. The administrator said Klass had called the chancellor's office and talked with someone there. When Klass hinted that he was considering legal action against the university, the call had been transferred to the administrator, who told Boeche he thought he had been able to mollify Klass.

The university sent Klass a letter, thanking him for his interest, and assumed that would end the matter. It was wrong.

At the conference, held between November 11 and 13 at the university conference center, Boeche showed some of us a copy of the memo in which the administrator paraphrased Klass' suggestion that UFO cover-up proponents were serving the ends of Soviet foreign policy. Of course by now we were used to the sort of overheated rhetoric that flows in an unending stream of vitriol

from the mouths and keyboards of CSICOP's bombast artists. After all, Klass and his CSICOP colleagues had already characterized us ufologists as antiscience cultists, cryptofascists, mental cases, money-grubbing exploiters, and raving irrationalists, and CSICOP chairman Paul Kurtz had repeatedly assured the press that societal acceptance of anomalies and the paranormal threatens the fabric of civilization.

Still, Klass' linking of ufologists with Communist subversion was a new wrinkle. Klass, we knew, would not be happy to learn that these peculiar private pronouncements were now peculiar public pronouncements. As it turned out, he wasn't just unhappy. He was livid.

On November 23 Klass wrote the administrator, who was startled to see large chunks of Klass' words from their three-month-old conversation quoted verbatim -- indicating, the administrator correctly surmised, that Klass had taped the two without informing him he was doing so. Klass said that since a "copy of your memo was 'leaked' to outsiders," he wanted to "clarify and expand upon statements" he had made. He said "we" -- presumably meaning himself and CSICOP -- did not seek to "prevent conferences or meetings by those who want to propose UFOs" but that he had some trouble with the university's sponsorship of a conference on the subject. What, he asked, would the university do "if the American Nazi Party came in and said they [sic] wanted to hold a conference?"

"I emphasize to you that I am not, repeat not, suggesting that any of the people or any of the organizations are in any way affiliated with Communist Fronts or with the Soviet Union. But as a patriotic American, I very much resent the charge of 'coverup', of lying, of falsehoods, charged against not one Administration, not two, but eight Administrations going back to a man from Missouri named Truman, a man named Dwight Eisenhower. Because if this charge is true -- Cosmic Watergate -- then all of these Presidents were implicated, and all of their Administrations.... [In making this charge, ufologists] seek what the Soviet Union does -- to convey to the public that our Government can not be trusted, that it lies, that it falsifies. Now I'm not so naive -- remembering Watergate -- to say that never has happened in history. But from my firsthand experience (i.e., 17 years in the field of UFOlogy), I know this charge is completely false. And I resent it as an American citizen."

Remarkably, Klass distributed copies of this letter to others, including me, on the evident belief that it would exonerate him, in other words demonstrate that when read in context his sentiments would sound rational. He would even charge that the administrator's paraphrase had been "inaccurate," when if anything it made Klass' charge sound marginally less nutty. As I wrote Klass on December 6, "In the past, when your critics have accused you of engaging in McCarthyism, they were using the term in a metaphorical sense. Now, it seems, they will be able to use it in the most literal sense."

As ufologists gleefully copied and circulated both the administrator's memo and Klass' November 23 letter, Klass complained to the university about its release of the memo and threatened legal action. Late in January 1984 the administrator told Boeche, according to the latter, that he feared losing his job over the affair.

About six weeks later the administrator informed Boeche that the university would not sponsor another anomalies conference. The decision, he said, "came straight from the chancellor's office." Pressed for a reason, the administrator responded evasively but "strongly implied," in Boeche's words, that the decision had to do with the troubles the previous conference had brought them. A short time later Boeche received written notification of the decision. The letter gave no reason for the decision.

Boeche, who had hoped to make the conference an annual event, sought alternative funding without success. In October 1984, in a final desperate move, Boeche mailed a letter to all who had attended the 1983 meeting and urged them to encourage the chancellor to reverse his decision. One attendee published a letter to the editor of the Lincoln Journal about the episode. Subsequently an Associated Press reporter interviewed the administrator, who said -- for the first time ever -- that the university had canceled sponsorship because it had lost money on

the conference. The university repeated the claim in a form letter it sent to all inquirers.

Till now, in all of Boeche's discussions with university officials re- garding the conference-related problems, not one -- least of all the administrator -- had raised the issue of the conference's profitability. All those with whom Boeche spoke had talked only of Klass' legal threats. At no time was Boeche shown a financial statement documenting the university's belated version of events. In a November 2 meeting with the chancellor's assistant, who dutifully recited the new party line, Boeche asked whom he should believe: an administrator who was afraid of losing his job (and whose private statements had been markedly different from his later public ones) or a chancellor's assistant who could take that job away. "It was quite obvious that that was a question he didn't want to answer," Boeche recalls.

In fact, the previous January 11 Klass had written this man complaining about the university's failure to respond to an earlier letter. Klass said he expected the university to express "shock and disgust" over the leaking of the memo and to apologize "for such irresponsible actions." If the university chose not to act, Klass wrote, he would consider taking "appropriate legal action to set the record straight and to clear my name." Eleven days later he wrote the chancellor's assistant again and asked for a "list of the Board of Regents of your University, together with their mailing addresses." Soon Klass was hearing from the university's attorney.

Meanwhile Klass and I were engaged in correspondence about this strange ongoing episode. Though not denying that he had threatened to sue the university -- indeed he sent me a copy of the just-quoted January 11 letter -- he continually tried to change the subject, citing conferences he had not called sponsors to complain about, as if these were relevant to anything or, even more crazily, evidence of personal virtue. He claimed not to object to "pseudoscience" conferences in principle, only to those that universities sponsored without bringing in speakers who shared Klass' views.

As of March 31, a letter of his to me makes clear, the university -- despite what by now had been a number of exchanges between it and him -- had not claimed that it lost money on the conference. To the contrary, Klass said it was his "understanding" that the university had not contributed money to the organizers or allowed uncompen- sated use of its conference facilities. Writing on May 14, he emphatically denied believing or suggesting that the university cancelled sponsorship because the conference lost money. He said he understood that the university shared neither profits nor losses from the conference.

On April 4 I remarked that "you really never addressed the issue I attempted to raise ... that you had a role, apparently the deciding role, in the University of Nebraska's decision not to sponsor next year's UFO/Forcean conference. As you are well aware, the threat of being sued is a powerful way of affecting somebody's behavior.... It is hardly surprising that the university did not want to involve itself in litigation and entirely predictable that it chose to scuttle the Forcean conference as a consequence. It just wasn't worth the hassle in the university's view. You, by your threats and meddling, apparently presented a problem the university did not want to deal with. It was easier to cancel next year's conference than to risk further problems. I am not aware that I accused you of deliberately setting out to sabotage the conference. I said that your acts had the effect of so doing."

In subsequent correspondence Klass insisted, ludicrously, that his legal threats could have had nothing to do with the university's decision because if they had, he implied, university spokesmen would have said so openly. He seemed to be suggesting that the university had simply seen the wisdom of his argument about the conference's lack of "balance" and acted accordingly. He went on to compare university sponsorship of a UFO conference to sponsorship of a Ku Klux Klan or Nazi Party meeting. Klass would also contend that proponents of a UFO cover-up were in effect accusing Presidents of treason, a "slanderous" charge.

All the while ufologists and the UFO press were having great fun at Klass' expense, with his desperate clarifications and rationalizations only fueling the merriment. Finally and

hilariously, on October 18, notwithstanding his earlier assertions that the university had not lost money from the conference, Klass copied and distributed an October 14 AP article from the Omaha World Herald, in which the university introduced the loss-of-money yarn to the world. He cited it as proof that he had been right all along.

End of Part 1

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