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'Debunkers vs. UFO Menace' - Part 2

From: clark@canby.mn.frontiercomm.net
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Subject: 'Debunkers vs. UFO Menace' - Part 2

The Debunkers vs. the UFO Menace;
or, Is Ufology Tantamount to Communism?
Part 2
by Jerome Clark

(written in 1992)

In 1986 Omni editor Dick Teresi asked if I would do a short article for an upcoming issue on censorship in science. I responded with a manuscript I titled "Anomaly Bashing"; it was published as "Censoring the Paranormal" in the February 1987 issue. (It was later reprinted in Ted Schultz's 1989 book *The Fringes of Reason*, page 203.)

The piece dealt with debunking extremism, much of it associated with CSICOP. In it I devoted a paragraph to the Nebraska episode. (See Part 1 for details.)

No sooner had the issue hit the stands than I was taking calls from Teresi and, shortly after, from Omni's attorney. Leading CSICOPs had contacted Teresi to let him know sentiments such as mine were unacceptable to the debunking thought police (I had urged an end to the "hysteria" and a return to the "serious business of dispassionate investigation," apparently just about the last thing the debunkers wanted to hear); more important, Klass had actually threatened to sue over my few words. Omni asked for additional documentation beyond what I had already provided, and that was the end of at least that much.

I had written CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz as long ago as December 7, 1983, to ask him what he thought of Klass' charge that ufologists were serving Soviet ends. Enclosing a transcript of Klass' remarks, I asked, "Does CSICOP condone these sorts of charges? Do you ... draw a line between hard-hitting criticisms of anomalous claims and the extravagant, even scurrilous charges Klass has made in his communications [with the Nebraska administrator]?"

Kurtz's response, dated December 20, can best be characterized as mealy-mouthed. After assuring me of his belief in free expression, he said Klass was speaking for himself and CSICOP members hold a range of opinions. Translation: Kurtz did not want to get involved. Even the leveling of charges most people would regard as McCarthy-ite could elicit no condemnation, or even a mild demur, from the leadership, which had already tolerated accusations from Klass and other CSICOP-affiliated debunkers that ufologists are exploiters, irrationalists, cultists, and so on. Perhaps, seen in this context, it is true that Klass' ufology-is-tantamount-to-Communism spiel amounted to no significant escalation of either vitriol or craziness.

Still, while CSICOP is immensely indulgent of even the most lunatic attacks on paranormal and anomalous claims and claimants, it has no tolerance whatever for criticisms of itself, as its high-dudgeon reaction to my Omni essay had already demonstrated. In that vein, in a June 10, 1987, note, Kurtz sniffed about my "unrelenting attacks on CSICOP in Fate and other magazines."

I replied on July 8: "It is strange to get this [complaint] from someone who directs an organization devoted to nothing but 'unrelenting attacks' on proponents of anomalies and the paranormal. At least 'Fate and other magazines' -- unlike [CSICOP's magazine] Skeptical Inquirer -- devote only a small, even tiny, percentage of their pages to criticism of those with whom they disagree.... I realize that CSICOP, like any organization with political objectives, may not have the luxury of choosing its allies as carefully as it might like. But you can hardly protest when from time to time you are held accountable for the antics of those whose activities you promote and whom you seldom criticize in any meaningful way.... [I]t is more than a trifle hypocritical for you to react with shock and indignation when you are attacked in return. I'm reminded of what Edward G. Robinson said in the classic gangster film Little Caesar: 'You've been dishin' it out so long you can't take it no more'."

Skeptical Inquirer editor Kendrick Frazier, one of those who had complained to Teresi, wrote an indignant response to my Omni article in the September 1987 issue of his magazine. What it lacked in specifics, it made up for in sweeping proclamations, one of them that my words about Klass were "malicious" and, moreover, known by me "to be false." (If that were true, of course, Klass would have had a legal case.) Frazier neither mentioned nor questioned Klass' McCarthyite slur of ufologists, thus becoming yet another CSICOP notable to maintain a tactful silence on the subject. Frazier did not answer my letter challenging him on these points.

I did, however, get a letter from Mark Plummer, then CSICOP's Executive Director, who wrote me on August 31 on another matter. In my September 4 reply, I said, in part:

"The whole controversy about my Omni editorial centers on the question of whether CSICOP contains individuals of extreme (i.e., lunatic fringe) views and whether CSICOP can fairly be criticized for same. In that regard it is surely significant that at no time has CSICOP publicly disassociated itself from the pronouncements of Philip J. Klass, who holds that UFO proponents are serving the ends of Soviet foreign policy, nor is there any evidence that it has reprimanded him in any way. In fact, the editor of Skeptical Inquirer has expressed outrage that anyone would take exception to such assertions, even suggesting that someone who did (me) could only have been acting out of malice.

"The clear implication is that CSICOP -- which continues to portray Klass as a responsible spokesman and to give wide publicity to his assorted pronouncements -- either agrees with these views or at least considers them acceptable expressions of opinion."

Plummer wrote back on September 17 to ask for "proof" that Klass had accused ufologists of serving Soviet ends. I provided such proof, which included a transcript of the phone conversation that Klass himself had given me (quoted at length in Part 1). The response was silence -- at least on his end. I heard not from Plummer but from Klass, to whom I learned Plummer had sent copies of my letters.

Klass' communication, dated October 5, was titled "AN OPEN-LETTER CHALLENGE TO JEROME CLARK." Referring to my September 4 letter, Klass noted my observation (though adding italics to it) that he "holds that UFO proponents are serving the ends of Soviet foreign policy." He grandly offered \$5000 to the Center for UFO Studies (of which I am an officer) if -- Klass' italics again -- "you can find in any of my published books or articles where I have said that 'UFO proponents are serving the ends of Soviet foreign policy', or words substantially equivalent." He hastily appended this amendment: the offer "does not apply to my expression of personal opinion during a private telephone conversation" with the Nebraska administrator.

In an open letter of my own three days later, I pointed out the obvious: that at no time had I ever charged, indicated, implied, or hinted that Klass had published his strange equation of ufologists with Communists; the issue all along had been his privately uttered words to the administrator. "Amusingly," I noted, "in making his 'challenge', Klass seeks to exclude the very evidence that bears on the issue."

Meanwhile, in an October 13 letter to Marcello Truzzi (who co-founded CSICOP with Kurtz but who had left the organization long since to become one of its major critics), Klass said he stood by the sentiments he had expressed to the administrator.

Having heard nothing from Plummer, I wrote him on November 18. "Now that you have been fully informed of Klass' excesses, may we expect to see an editorial in Skeptical Inquirer apologizing to the UFO community for being subject to such scurrilous accusations?" I asked. "May we expect to see a statement declaring that McCarthyism (or any other form of irrational excess) has no part in the anomaly debate? Or may we expect, as I'm afraid I do, absolutely no reaction whatever from CSICOP?"

On November 23 Plummer replied. Having reviewed the evidence, he saw nothing "excessive" in Klass' pronouncements. It was, he added, all my fault for "jumping to conclusions."

To this day not a single significant CSICOP figure has disavowed Klass' charges or chastised him for making them. Instead CSICOP has reserved all its criticism for those who, like me, have raised the issue. Publicly CSICOP pretends to believe that my portrayal of these events is false.

On April 26, 1990, Rick Moen of Bay Area Skeptics posted Klass' account of the episode on a computer network used by debunkers. Hilariously, Klass fails to note anywhere that he had equated ufologists with Communist agents, though he does acknowledge that he "asked if the American Nazi Party wanted to rent its facilities for a meeting, whether the University would 'sponsor' said meeting" -- evidently a moral dilemma he found equivalent to sponsorship of a UFO conference.

Meanwhile, Philip J. Klass remains a CSICOP and debunking superstar, a regular speaker at CSICOP's conferences, and a frequent contributor to Skeptical Inquirer. Prometheus Books, which Kurtz heads, continues to issue Klass titles.

A final note:

On October 28, 1991, I asked Klass, "Do you still consider proponents of a UFO cover-up threats to the republic? Or do you now, at last, disavow the remarks you made -- you know, the ones so embarrassing to you that you threatened to sue the leakers -- to the University of Nebraska?"

Klass replied on November 26. After informing me, apparently as yet another ufologist equivalent to Communists, that I could have become one of the top writers for Pravda in the pre-peristroika era, he denied ever alleging that ufologists constitute a threat to the republic. In the next breath he affirmed that yes, he stood by his remarks to the Nebraska administrator -- in which he held that ufologists constitute a threat to the republic.

In a rational world CSICOP would have been laughed out of existence following revelations of its bumbling and double-dealing in the "Starbaby" scandal (as chronicled in side-splitting detail by Dennis Rawlins in Fate, October 1981). But in this irrational world CSICOP continues to masquerade as the voice of reason and, as one of its leading lights would have us believe, ufology is still tantamount to Communism.

End

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