



Local Skeptics Form Organization to Examine Paranormal, Fringe Science

More than 100 enthusiastic persons attended the inaugural meeting of the National Capital Area Skeptics, a group formed to examine objectively claims of paranormal phenomena and fringe science. The event was held on Sunday, March 29, at the outdoor amphitheater of the Edmund Burke School in Washington, D.C.

Some 1100 persons were invited to the meeting, using a mailing list of Virginia, Maryland, and District of Columbia subscribers to the *Skeptical Inquirer*, the publication of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. In addition to those attending, more than 200 responded to the mailing expressing interest. NCAS will be neither a chapter nor an affiliate of the national body but rather a local group that shares similar aims.

The event was convened by Stanley K. Bigman, a retired sociologist, Philip J. Klass, the noted UFO expert and author, and Sean O'Neill, counseling psychologist.

Attendees signed up for committees in a variety of areas as well as for an interim board (see related article). The conveners passed the hat to collect funds to defray their startup expenses of \$500—the crowd asked that magician Jamy Swiss' hat not be used!—and temporary treasurer Grace Denman reported that the proceeds totalled \$500.50.

At two subsequent meetings of the interim board, Bigman was elected president, Chip Denman vice president, Jack Lass corporate secretary, Susan Wells corresponding secretary, and Grace Denman treasurer. The board debated and passed a set of bylaws, a dues structure, and a statement of purpose. The dues for charter members will be \$20 (\$30 for double memberships). Readers who have not yet signed up may use the convenient form attached. The interim board will hold elections at a membership meeting in the near future.

The organization was incorporated as a non-profit educational organization in the District of Columbia in April. In addition to the substantive work of its standing committees, it will publish a *Newsletter* (this is the first issue) and conduct bimonthly meetings on topics of interest. The first of these will be held June 7 on the topic of UFOs and purported abductions.

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June Meeting: "UFO Abductions – Fact or Fantasy?"

Are UFO-nauts (extraterrestrials) invading the privacy of people's homes, subjecting them to terrible physical indignities? Are ETs raping women (and occasionally men), removing unborn embryos from pregnant women to be transplanted into the wombs of female ETs? Is an intergalactic genetic experiment underway in which many dozens of Americans are unwilling victims?

The answers are yes—according to two new books. One, *Communion*, by Whitley Strieber (New York: Morrow, 1986), has been in second place on the New York Times best-seller list for several weeks, and the more recent book *Intruders*, by Bud Hopkins (New York: Random House, 1987), is now vying for similar honors.

Prospective members of the new National Capital Area Skeptics and guests are invited to decide for themselves at the group's first general meeting on Sunday afternoon, June 7, from 2 to 4 PM, in Bethesda, Maryland. (See the map and directions below.)

You'll hear two internationally recognized UFOlogists, Dr. Bruce S. Maccabee and Philip J. Klass, examine the issues in a lively discussion on "UFO Abductions: Fact or Fantasy?" moderated by James H. Sharp, Director of the Albert Einstein Planetarium, National Air & Space Museum. Klass will reissue his \$10,000 challenge to any person to prove that he or she has been abducted by an extraterrestrial spaceship by reporting it to the FBI—which has kidnaping jurisdiction—and receiving a finding that an abduction by off-planet beings has taken place.

(Continued on page 3.)

Statement of Purpose

NCAS attempts to encourage the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and to disseminate factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public.

NCAS does not reject claims on *a priori* grounds, antecedent to inquiry, but rather examines them objectively and carefully.

Signed articles represent the opinions of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NCAS. Unsigned articles are the responsibility of the NCAS Newsletter Committee. Only articles clearly marked as such represent positions of the NCAS Board of Directors.

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Fringe Science Explored at 1987 CSICOP Conference

By Chip Denman

A record 1200 persons attended the 1987 conference of the Committee for the Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal April 3-4 in Pasadena, California. Entitled "Controversies in Science and Fringe Science," the meeting stressed the important role of skepticism even in areas of science not associated with paranormal claims. Thus, in addition to subjects familiar to readers of *Skeptical Inquirer* such as astrology and psychic fraud, special sessions focused on topics of controversy within the bounds of modern science.

The first morning session considered the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the galaxy. Astronomers Frank Drake, dean of natural sciences at the University of California in Santa Cruz, and Jill Tarter, of the University of California at Berkeley, argued that other intelligent beings were not just plausible, but likely, given the typical nature of our own sun. Tarter, a research astronomer at the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute, described the ongoing efforts to detect radio signals originating from putative extraterrestrial civilizations by means of radio telescopes. Astronomer Robert Rood of the University of Virginia, presented a probabilistic counter-argument. Given the age of the galaxy, he said, all solar systems such as our own should have been colonized by now. Since we have not met alien pioneers, they, like unicorns, likely do not exist. Rood did concede that research such as that at SETI should be done anyway.

Animal language—as in the claims that non-human primates can learn to "speak" via sign language—was the topic of controversy for the afternoon session. Thomas Sebeok, a linguist at Indiana University and Fellow of CSICOP, was outspoken in his condemnation of the concept of animal language and the researchers who claim positive results. Gerd Hovelmann of the University of Marburg in West Germany compared the apes purportedly taught sign language to Clever Hans, the supposed calculating horse of the early 1900s. Hans, investigators found, would cease tapping his hoof to indicate a mathematical sum when he sensed that his audience knew the right answer had been achieved. Robert Rosenthal, a social psychologist at Harvard, warned of the danger of experimenter bias in all scientific research. An obvious omission was the lack of a speaker to present the case in support of animal language.

The second day of the program offered more of a mixed bag. The morning session dealt with controversial medical practices. Speakers gave historical and modern examples of extraordinary claims made by chiropractic, holistic, and nutritional medicine. A spokesperson for a chiropractic association defended the place of chiropractic manipulation in modern medicine. Modern chiropractic was called to task by William Jarvis M.D. of Loma Linda University for not better policing itself to protect the public from practitioners who make claims unsupported by and even at odds with current medical knowledge.

Concurrent afternoon sessions ranged from a debunking of spontaneous human combustion (soon to be published in *SI*) to the scams of storefront psychics investigated by the Los Angeles police.

Carl Sagan, the noted Cornell University astronomer and CSICOP fellow, gave the keynote address Friday evening in the Pasadena Center. Using an analogy of buying a used car, Sagan spoke of the importance of skeptical thinking in all aspects of life, enjoining us to be critical and "kick the tires" however we can. Sagan called for skepticism in political and governmental arenas, citing the Strategic Defense Initiative as a primary example of a program sorely in need of critical evaluation.

June Meeting, from page 1

Maccabee, a physicist employed by the Navy and chair of the Fund for UFO Research, has been investigating UFO cases for nearly two decades and has written more than two dozen papers on the subject. He is recognized as one of the most technically competent and experienced "pro-UFO" investigators in the United States today.

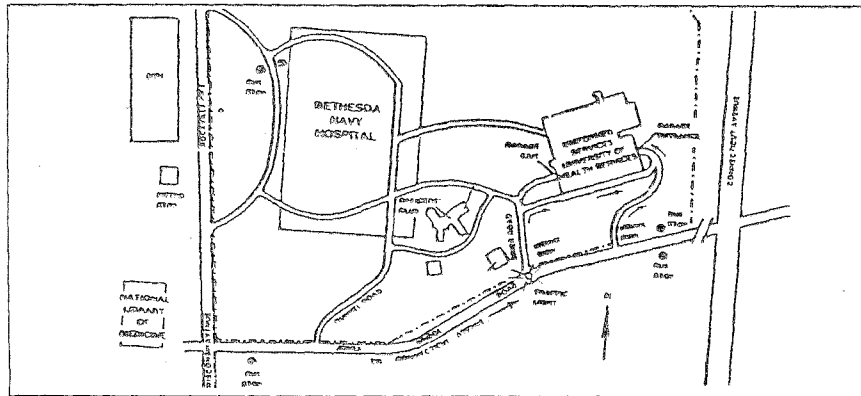
Klass, a founding fellow of CSICOP and chair of its UFO subcommittee (as well as NCAS's UFO committee), has been investigating famous UFO cases, including alleged abductions, for more than 20 years. He has written three books on the subject, most recently *UFOs: The Public Deceived* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus, 1983). After nearly 35 years as a senior editor with *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine, Klass is now a contributing editor to that publication as well as to *High Technology* magazine.

Time will be set aside for questions from the audience. There will also be a brief NCAS business meeting, and members and prospective members will get a chance to meet committee heads and sign up.

The meeting will be held at the building of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences on the grounds of the Bethesda Naval Hospital. To get there by car, enter from Jones Bridge Road at Grier Road (at the light). This is the back entrance: the front entrance is closed on Sunday. Follow the signs to the parking garage: you can park inside free, but will have to check in with the security guard. Just tell him you're with the Skeptics! Go up one flight to the auditorium and you're there.

You can also get there by Metro: take the Red Line to the Medical Center stop (marked on the map). It's about a 10 to 15 minute walk to the USUHS building.

Admission is free to charter members (see the membership form below). Others will be charged \$3, which can be credited toward your membership if you sign up at the meeting.



Membership Urged

By Stanley Bigman, President

Do you strongly doubt the claims of parapsychology?

Are you concerned about the use of graphologists, seers, and other practitioners of unproven techniques in the criminal justice system?

Are you bothered by the readiness of the communications media to support and legitimize such pseudoscientific enterprises as astrology, spoon-bending, and dowsing?

Are you alarmed by attempts to substitute the claims of creationism for painstakingly acquired knowledge in such fields as paleontology, geology, and biology?

Do you sometimes feel that, as a skeptic, you are all but isolated in a sea of credulity?

If your answer to many of these questions is "yes," you are not alone. You are one of over 1,000 local subscribers to the *Skeptical Inquirer* we're sending this *Newsletter*. Nearly 300 of us have already indicated that we want to organize ourselves.

Our purposes are essentially:

- To expose untested pseudoscientific claims.

- To seek evidence that will make possible testing claims of the paranormal and fringe sciences, through informal investigation and scientific research.

- To promote education in critical thinking—skepticism—for children and adults.

If such aims appeal to you, we are eager to have you join us.



Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and disseminating factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public. I understand that my charter membership will be good for one year and will include a subscription to this *Newsletter*.

Single: _____ @ \$20.00

Double: _____ @ \$30.00

Make checks payable to
Nat. Cap. Area Skeptics, Inc.
and mail to:

Grace Denman
8006 Valley St.
Silver Spring, MD 20910

NAME	
STREET	APT #
CITY	STATE ZIP CODE

NCAS Committees Set Up

At the organizational meeting of the National Capital Area Skeptics on March 29, attendees signed up to take part in a number of committees, through which much of NCAS's work will be organized. These committees are directed toward either substantive areas (creationism, astrology, and so forth) or toward specific tasks of the organization (producing this *Newsletter*, conducting education in skepticism, and planning programs).

Chairs for these committees have been selected on an interim basis (permanent chairs will be selected by the committees once they have been organized). Anyone wishing to join one or more committees is invited to contact the respective chairs, listed on page 2. Those who would like to suggest the formation of additional committees are invited to do so by contacting interim president Stanley Bigman at 654-7362.

We are grateful to those who signed up for committees at the founding meeting on March 29. Your chairman should be in touch with you shortly.—Robert Means

Media Watch

The *Newsletter* plans to publish a Media Watch column in each issue as a standing feature. Members are encouraged to mail clippings and other material to Dan Knauf, 1339 Wallach Place NW, Washington, DC 20009.

Key Congressional Committee Chairs Meet with Uri Geller

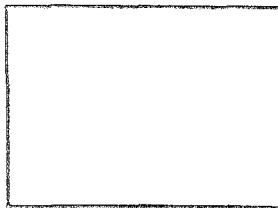
Magician Uri Geller, whose purported ability to bend spoons, fix broken watches, and find lost objects with his psychic ability has long ago been exposed as trickery, met with key members of Congress on April 24 in the Capitol building, according to several press accounts. Geller has been the subject of several critical articles in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, as well as in books by CSICOP fellows James Randi and Martin Gardner.

Some 35 people attended the meeting, including the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Claiborne Pell (D.-RI), and the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Dante Fascell (D.-FL). Pell is said to have had a long interest in psychic phenomena, and an aide told this *Newsletter* that the senator favors government funding of psychic research. The *Washington Post* has reported on several occasions that the Department of Defense has sponsored research on the possible use of paranormal abilities in military applications, apparently a result of a fear that Soviet scientists may have an edge in this area. An article two years ago by Jack Anderson said that the Pentagon fears that Soviet psychics could trigger U.S. warheads in their silos or examine the contents of classified documents. The magazine *Common Cause* reported recently that a noted skeptic is heading a panel formed by the National Academy of Sciences to investigate these claims. It is precisely such credulous acceptance of unsubstantiated or even fraudulent claims by political and bureaucratic figures that NCAS seeks to illuminate and challenge.

Organization, from page 1

Some 1400 *SI* subscribers and others in the national capital area will receive this issue of the *Newsletter*. Hereafter, only members will receive the publication—so join now. The approved budget provides for an eight-page bimonthly publication mandated to publish substantive work in the field written by members of NCAS's various committees.

The attendees at the inaugural meeting discussed a variety of areas of interest, from UFOs to medical quackery to parapsychology. Several noted that NCAS has a unique vantage point from which to comment on the effect of fringe science on the national political process.



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