



National Capital Area

# SKEPTICAL EYE

Fall 1989

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Randi uses psychic energy—"I don't need to make noises, but the union likes it"—to make an audience member's watch run backward. (Photo by Mike Scott.)

## Randi Claims Extraordinary Proof

By Stephen R. Dujack

The New Age's pesky gremlin, James "The Amazing" Randi, made fools of an overflow audience of local skeptics and the general public during the course of a two-hour lecture July 8 at the National Institutes of Health—then received a standing ovation.

Bending the emotions of the crowd like one of Uri Geller's spoons, he had the audience of more than 550 alternating between laughter and rage as he related his recent exposés of faith healing, psychic surgery, and the susceptibility of the public and the media to the extraordinary claims of the paranormalists. The attendees were astonished at some of his demonstrations and revelations of New Age skullduggery, and genuinely tricked by a few well-chosen illusions mixed into the lecture "so you can learn just how easily you can be fooled."

Randi was introduced by Penn Jillette—in town for a long run at the National Theater with his partner Teller (see story at right)—who said that he had become a skeptic in his youth when he saw a similar show by Randi. "It was the most important show I saw in my life," Jillette said.

Adjusting the microphone stand up to its limit to accommodate his height, Penn vigorously defended the right of New Age proponents to make their claims. Because it is legal, however, doesn't mean it's moral, he said. He proposed that skeptics answer extraordinary claims by saying, "That's really fascinating. Prove it."

After a brief demonstration of his fire eating—all the more sensational because he was suffering from tonsillitis at the time—Penn introduced Randi. The diminutive, wizard-like magician walked to the microphone stand and lowered it a good two feet. "I'm a liar, a cheat, a charlatan, and a faker," Randi declared. "There are other people

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## A Gift from the Magi

By Chip Denman

Penn & Teller left "newage" nonsense bruised and battered on the stage floor in a special evening with the National Capital Area Skeptics. The enthusiastic response of the audience clearly proved the performers' concluding claim that true skeptics love a mystery. Comic magicians with a serious side, Penn Jillette and Teller graciously invited the rest of the audience to join with more than 200 members and guests in a post-show question and answer session on Sunday evening, June 25.

Following the evening performance of their hit Broadway show—which during its six-week run at the National Theater aimed gleeful barbs at Indian fakirs, Shirley MacLaine, levitation, and biblical prophecies—Penn & Teller returned to the stage to answer questions from the skeptical crowd.

"I have unidentified objects in my refrigerator, but that doesn't mean I've been visited by aliens," said Penn, re-

(Continued on page 5.)



Penn & Teller, flanked by Grace & Chip Denman, sport their National Capital Area Skeptics t-shirts. (Photo by Randy Lockwood.)

## National Capital Area Skeptics

### Statement of Purpose

NCAS encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and disseminates 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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### Letter to the Editor:

I recently had the opportunity to read the January issue of your publication. Being somewhat of a skeptic myself, I was intrigued by the concept of your organization, but my intrigue quickly turned to dismay after reading your medical quackery article. Steven Barrett over the years has amassed a large quantity of health quackery examples. Some of what he says is true but much of it is half-truth and misinterpretation. Rather than being objective and rational he seems motivated by the same fanatic zeal that infects many quacks.

People like Barrett are not interested in the truth; they are interested in promoting their own version of the way they think things should be. Barrett has been and continues to be a spokesman for Organized Medicine, which sees any alternative therapies as an economic threat.

Let me give you some examples of people or treatments that in the past were considered by organized medicine as quackery:

■ Podiatrists, optometrists, psychologists;

■ Chiropractors, who were considered quacks and evidently still are by Barrett, have been proven in study after study to be the most effective treatment for low back pain. Incidentally, the American Medical Association was found guilty of unfair competitive practices and attempting to destroy a licensed profession for financial gain in the Supreme Court of Chicago in August 1987;

■ Galileo was imprisoned for years by the church for his observations.

For years, organized medicine has held the position that nutritional treatment has no effect on cancer and was quackery. A recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* concluded that vitamin E lowers the incidence of lung cancer. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a study in December 1988 showing that taking multivitamins during pregnancy significantly reduces the risk of neurological birth defects. The *American Journal of Cardiology* published a study in July 1988 on how fiber lowers blood cholesterol.

These are just a few examples I was able to glean from my medical journals in a few minutes.

Myopic zealots like Barrett usually fail to mention these studies. They prefer to focus on the few rotten apples in each profession or on the holes in any alternative treatment. In my opinion, while some alternative remedies are outright fraud, others are usually an exaggeration of some partially valid treatment. Wouldn't we be better off approaching these alternative remedies objectively, investigating whether they may have some partial validity.

Barrett should confine his search for quackery to his own profession. What about the Thalidomide tragedy, or A.H. Robins' notorious IUD, or unnecessary hysterectomies, and studies that most drugs don't do what the manufacturers' claim? How about an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* asserting that we are losing the war on cancer despite the billions spent? Perhaps quack cancer remedies aren't the only ones that are ineffective.

Remember, fellow skeptics, a true scientist is not motivated by emotion or prejudice. He simply seeks the truth in a rational, objective, open-minded manner to the best of his or her ability.

Peter J. Stanton, D.C.  
Burke, Virginia

### Moving?

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# Noted Author Tells How to Predict the Future—For Real!

By Randy Lockwood

Kim Long is neither a psychic nor a futurist. He is an internationally recognized author, syndicated columnist, social commentator, and observer of interesting trends. Since 1984 he has produced an annual edition of *The American Forecaster*, a collection of predictions on social and consumer trends for the coming year or two. On Sunday, June 4, he shared his methods and his insights on the near future with an enthusiastic group of National Capital Area Skeptics at the Tysons Pimmit Library.

The press has called Long "the first no-nonsense authority on the future" and the "guru of trends," but he is the first to admit skepticism at such claims. Perhaps one of the most remarkable things about his work is that he achieves success and acclaim through very conventional techniques which, coupled with his finely honed sense of humor, lead to fascinating insights.

He began his presentation by pointing out that the future will always tend be weirder than most prognosticators are willing to predict. He noted that even combining his knowledge of the purchasing power of pre-teens, the perpetual interest in new confections, and the basic appeal of gross items to this age group, he was unable to foresee the hot new candy of 1989—"Gummi Boogers!" (Samples were distributed to prove these really do exist.)

Long then explained how got his start in publishing as an editorial director of a now-defunct traditional almanac. This job gave him first-hand experience in creating astrological horoscopes, weather predictions, and fishing forecasts, using what he described as the "European darte-board technique." Long quickly realized that the content of his predictions was irrelevant to most of his readers, leaving him somewhat disillusioned with the process. As a joke, he assembled a collection of phony quatrains attributed to Nostradamus, along with meaningful interpretations for "The New Age." He laughingly noted that he still gets inquiries about these after almost a decade.

In 1984 he began using a variety of "real" sources of information to report on what was likely to transpire in the near future. Using such things as trade journals, stockholder reports, industry gossip, news of planned advertising campaigns, government statistical reports, and even NASA space flight manifests, he has been able to assemble an entertaining annual report on the year ahead.

Many of these predictions are easy. The 1989 edition of *The American Forecaster*, which went to press in June 1988, predicted the media hype over the 20th anniversary of Woodstock and Voyager II's successful mission at Neptune. Among the other trends revealed in the current *American Forecaster* are:

- an increase in exercise programs for chubby kids;
- an increasing loss of psychiatrists' clients to social workers; and
- the return of stilleto heels, air bags, and rock and roll nostalgia.

Of particular interest to skeptics is Long's prediction of fading interest in channeling. However, he noted that this decline will be due to its overuse and abuse, rather than to the public's realization of the intrinsic absurdity of the practice.

Like many other seers, Long is perhaps at his worst in predicting political futures. His portrait of political changes under President Dukakis (written when  
(Continued on page 5.)



**Author Kim Long, photographed during a 1987 Washington visit, feels he is safe in predicting an outbreak of 17-year cicadas in the year 2004!**

## President's Column

### How We Spent Our Summer Vacation

Readers of this issue of the *Skeptical Eye* can see that this summer our organization has produced its most successful programs to date. Hundreds of persons attended our last two events. Local media have taken notice. Thanks to the high visibility of Penn Jillette, Teller, and James Randi, and to the volunteer members who have worked hard behind the scenes, more and more people are hearing about the National Capital Area Skeptics. (How many members noticed that the *Washington Post's* profile of Penn & Teller mentioned Penn's National Capital Area Skeptics t-shirt?) The James Randi program at the National Institutes of Health attracted media from all over and generated hundreds of curious phone calls. More than 40 persons have become members since July—the largest influx of new members since our founding.

The word is out that "skeptics are cool," even in the midst of a Washington summer! And to help get the word out, we now have a new phone number: (301) 587-3827. It will serve as the official phone number for the organization, and you can call it to get announcements of upcoming events.

Other skeptics groups around the country have not been so fortunate. The Northwest Skeptics recently announced that their newsletter would cease regular publication. Too few volunteers were trying to do too many tasks. Rather than fold completely, the Northwest Skeptics elected to conserve resources by dropping their well-produced publication.

This is a sobering reminder that the success of an activist group such as ours depends entirely on the willingness of members to contribute. The *Skeptical Eye* is a publication of which members can be proud. For members who are geographically scattered, it may be a single point of contact with others who share a skeptical attitude. We are fortunate to have dedicated volunteers contributing their talents—and new contributions are always welcome.

(Continued on page 5)

## Randi, from p. 1

who tell you they're the real thing—the Uri Gellers, the Jeane Dixons and so forth.” Since they don't tell people they are using legerdemain, he said, the public assumes their feats are paranormal. The magician then walked away from the microphone and kept talking through the auditorium public-address system. “You naturally assumed I was talking through the microphone. It's dead; I'm using a wireless mike. There are other assumptions you can make that can cost you your money or your life.”

Randi then spoke for about an hour on his recent efforts to stalk and expose faith healers. “It was one of the most debilitating experiences of my life—I had to follow people around who were dying and in some cases watch them die, convinced they were cured.

“It was even less fun to see children with tears in their eyes, thinking they would be cured by Jesus. Then later, more tears, their legs still twisted, the crutches still there, told they weren't cured because they hadn't believed strongly enough.”

Obviously caught up in the emotion of the memories, Randi condemned a long string of alleged faith healers: Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts, Peter Popoff, W.V. Grant, David Paul, and Leroy Jenkins. He told of the huge sums of money raked in by these clergymen, many of whom use techniques similar to magicians who specialize in mentalism.

Grant, for instance, memorizes “prayer cards” filled in by people as they arrive at his healing sessions and handed to his wife. In many cases, she will ask feeble but able-bodied attendees to sit in wheelchairs provided by Grant, then whisk them to the front of the audience. Having memorized the information on the prayer cards, Grant then “heals” these people while astonishing the audience with his knowledge of their background during the show.

Randi then played a tape of an appearance he did on the *Johnny Carson Show*. On the show, he ran a tape of a healing session done by Peter Popoff, who produced remarkable bits of personal information about attendees, then proceeded to announce them healed. Randi repeated the tape for Carson, this time with intercepted radio communications from Popoff's wife to a hearing aid in the minister's ear, giving him all the information he claimed was coming from God.

Before the Carson show, Randi said, Popoff was making \$1.4 million a month with this technique—tax free, no less—and Randi could not get the state of California to prosecute the faith healer despite the damning evidence of the videotape. After the Carson show, Popoff filed for bankruptcy.

“I learned three things from this episode,” Randi told the audience. “God's frequency is 39.10 megahertz, he's a woman, and he sounds like Popoff's wife.”

Accusations Randi made about former presidential candidate Pat Robertson were even more disturbing. He said that Robertson has pronounced diabetics in his audiences to be cured. “You are healed,” Randi quoted Robertson. “They went home and threw away their insulin. What happens? They die. Are they going to complain? No, because they're dead.”

Randi also said that Robertson once knowingly broadcast an



**Penn Jillette dazzles Randi's audience with his fire-eating. (Photo by Mike Scott.)**

affidavit of a man swearing that he had been healed by the minister—even though the man had already died of the disease.

The magician, also unable to stop psychic surgeons despite appeals to the police, once again “went over their heads” by using the Carson show. He played another tape for the audience of a gory demonstration of psychic surgery he had done on the show, seemingly ripping out huge hunks of tumorous material from a volunteer's abdomen. He told the crowd that the late actor Peter Sellers would probably still be alive had he not delayed bypass surgery for three years to seek out the healing services of the charlatans of the Philippines.

Randi's tricks were the fun part of the show. He bent a spoon grasped firmly between the hands of a young boy in the audience till it dropped into two pieces. He made a watch run backward in a woman's hand without touching it—then revealed how he had simply wound the crown with his thumb before placing it in the woman's palm.

“Uri Geller did this at Stanford Research Institute,” where parapsychologists Harold Putoff and Russell Targ “certified”



Geller's psychic abilities in the '70s. "I just showed you how it could be done so you can learn just how easily you can be fooled."

Randi had stern criticism for media complicity in accepting and disseminating the claims of the paranormalists, and for failing to investigate them. He told of a study that found that only four of 364 predictions made in the *National Enquirer* over a five-year period had proven true—and all of them were mundane generalizations. He related how the *New York Daily News* deleted from a story the fact that a supposed prediction of the tragic crash between two wide-bodied jets at the airport at Tenerife in the Canary Islands was actually a hoax done by a magician to hype his show.

He said that a conversation with the camera and sound crew of the former network show *That's Incredible* revealed that they had to work for two hours to get a good tape of an alleged psychokinetic who kept breathing into his microphone while blowing on the pencil he was supposedly moving by paranormal means. His most damning story, however, was how he got thousands of Australians and their press to believe that a neighbor of his was a channeler through inspired chicanery—and even received an offer for \$20,000 dollars for a lump of asphalt that he claimed was a crystal from Atlantis.

The *Washington Post*, incidentally, sent a reporter to the event, who sat next to me in the front row. Despite Randi's allegations, in particular that a recent presidential candidate was involved in disturbing (to say the least) deceptions, the *Post* failed to run a story on his speech.□

### *Penn & Teller, from p. 1*

sponding to a query about UFOs.

Audience members asked about Houdini's investigations of psychic phenomena and the kind of claims that Penn described as "newage hooey." Departing from the usual stance of professional magicians, they argued that some methods used by psychics should be publicly exposed. (Through the years, Penn & Teller have developed a reputation as the "bad boys of magic" for their seeming lack of reverence for the secrets behind tricks.)

Asked about their roles as skeptics and debunkers, Teller emphasized that they are not investigators like James Randi, but rather they are promoters of skepticism as a positive attitude. They are wise-guys who have an opportunity to present a "science is cool" as well as a "no drugs or alcohol" message to a large following, particularly among high school and college-age persons.

Penn Jillette and Teller not only provided their personal time for the discussion period, but also arranged for a special discount that enabled us to present the event both as a special benefit for members and as a fund-raiser. The National Capital Area Skeptics thanks Penn & Teller for making possible this unique event, as well as for their help in promoting James Randi's lecture (see page 1).□

### *Kim Long, from p.3*

Michael Dukakis was outpolling George Bush by nearly 20 points) makes for disappointing reading, but it is consistent with the trends at the time, when the Bush forces seemed to be rapidly running out of steam. Along with sports, political predictions account for the bulk of the errors in Long's self-confessed 20-percent failure rate.

Long then touched on the gullibility of press and its tendency to promote pseudoscience. He noted that much of this is due to the fact that New Age adherents, creationists, and other purveyors of irrationality are usually better at packaging their message than are scientists and skeptics. Long represents a good antidote to that problem. By one estimate he is the most frequently interviewed author in America. He has achieved that dubious status by talking rationally about things that real people are interested in, particularly fads and trends in our conspicuous consumption.

He ended his presentation as he had begun it, with the assertion that the future is often stranger than we imagine it to be. He suggested that one useful tool in making predictions is to employ what he calls "satiric prophecy": "simply predict the silliest plausible thing you can imagine. At the close of a radio show, he jokingly predicted the rise of backwards jogging as a way of exercising unused leg muscles. Several months later he came across a report of a new fad in Los Angeles—"retro jogging." On another occasion, observing the popularity of programs allowing people to swim with dolphins, he facetiously predicted a similar program for macho types involving swimming with sharks. Now it has been announced that "Shark Encounters" will open at Walt Disney World next spring. Nostradamus, eat your heart out!□

### *President's Message, from p.3*

In the coming months our own resources will be put to the test. When the CSICOP Annual Conference comes to Washington next March, CSICOP will depend on us to provide substantial person-power. Ticket takers, camera and tape operators, book and t-shirt sellers, and other unsung but utterly necessary helpers will be needed. And long before the conference arrives we need volunteers to help plan and produce more of the quality public events for which the National Capital Area Skeptics is becoming known.

As announced in the last issue, board member Gary Stone is organizing our volunteer resources. If you want to help out in any way, call Gary at (301) 470-1530, or our new phone number. Whatever your skills or interests, we need our members to be involved.

Active skeptics are the coolest of all!

—Chip Denman□

# NCAS Member Debates Leading Creationist

By Douglas E. McNeil

More than 300 people attended a service of the Central Baptist Church in Vienna, Virginia, on July 27 to hear a three-hour debate between National Capital Area Skeptics member Edward Max, a molecular biologist at the National Institutes of Health, and Duane Gish, vice president of the Institute for Creation Research and one of the most experienced spokesmen for "scientific creationism."

The event, sponsored by the church, addressed the question: "Resolved, that the theory of evolution is superior to special creation as an explanation of the scientific evidence related to origins." The format consisted of a one-hour presentation by each speaker, followed by 15-minute rebuttals and five-minute responses, with Max speaking first.

Max had learned that Gish was scheduled to speak via a creationist newsletter and called the church to ask who was presenting the scientific view. Church officials reported that they had been unable to find a suitable scientist. (This seems strange in a city that is home to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Association of Biology Teachers and the National Science Teachers Association.) Max volunteered to take on Gish on only three days' notice. Because of the timing, we were unable to notify National Capital Area Skeptics members about the debate, so the crowd was decidedly in Gish's camp.

Max began by stating that it was not his intention to destroy anyone's faith in God but, rather, to show that creationism is a shaky foundation on which to build one's faith. He said that evolution is reasonable based on known facts and proceeded to briefly outline the basic principles of evolution by natural selection. He then reviewed the consistency of the evidence of the fossil record with genealogies proposed by evidence from molecular biology.

Since Gish is known for his assertion that the evolu-



Gish: "Evolution violates laws of thermodynamics."



Max: "Creationism is a shaky foundation for faith."

tion of life violates the Second Law of Thermodynamics (stating that entropy, or overall disorder, must always increase), Max challenged Gish's grasp of thermodynamics by posing an introductory problem to Gish and offering his calculator for a quick solution. Gish said that he could solve it, but would not do so at this time. Max then offered a challenge to Gish to write a rigorous technical analysis of his thermodynamic argument against evolution to be published in the peer-reviewed journal *Creation/Evolution*. Gish said that he would be "more than happy" to accept. Max then carefully explained how local increases in order and complexity, such as the development of complex organisms, may occur in spontaneous processes without violating the Second Law.

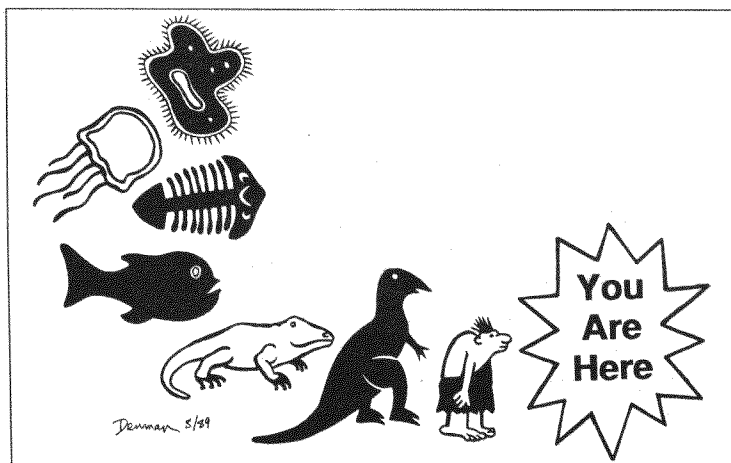
Gish began his presentation by stating that he wished to consider only the scientific and not the biblical evidence for creation. He contended that the "big bang" theory violates the First Law of Thermodynamics, conservation of energy, and that the order inherent in life violates the Second Law. The extreme improbability of specific proteins arising from chance alone, he claimed, leads him to reject evolution.

Gish then focused on the fossil record, stating that there were no transitional forms between invertebrates and fish, or between flying and non-flying insects. He asserted that the *Archaeopteryx* was fully a bird and all fossil hominids should be classified as apes, and not transitional forms between apes and humans. He said that the sequence from horse-drawn buggy to Model T to Model A to the modern Ford could be seen as an evolutionary sequence, but in fact we know that all of these were deliberately designed by intelligent creators.

Gish ended his initial presentation by challenging Max to explain how natural selection could produce the metamorphosis of a butterfly, which undergoes a massive structural change from the caterpillar state. He claimed he could not see how any intermediate stage could be adaptive.

In rebuttal, Max admitted an unfamiliarity with the

(Continued on page 7.)



evolutionary history of butterflies, but he quickly added that gaps in our knowledge will always occur under any theory, and that this cannot be taken as a refutation of evolutionary theory. In response to other arguments made by Gish, he pointed out that fish and insects are among the oldest forms of life and that it is not surprising that the transitional fossil record should be poor for these animals, particularly when you consider that such branch points constitute a very small fraction of the evolutionary history. Also, it is impossible to satisfy creationists on transitional forms, since they always insist on classifying such organisms as already recognized and established forms.

In Gish's rebuttal he noted that since biologists claim to have found fossil bacteria three billion years old, they should be able to find the missing transitional forms he alluded to, which would be much younger. He then argued that the molecular similarity of distantly related animals (as measured by evolutionists) showed that very different organisms are equally related, which he interpreted to mean separately created.

In Max's final rebuttal, he returned to the probability argument by noting that once the process of organization of life gets under way, the odds against complex structures are greatly reduced with cumulative selection. He closed by telling the audience that since the overwhelming majority of scientists accept evolution, perhaps it is worthy of their consideration as well.

Gish's closing asserted that dogs are still dogs, fish are still fish, and fruit flies are still fruit flies even though they have reproduced billions of times more often than larger animals. He ended by saying that, in his view, fish don't have ancestors and neither do we, that evolution would violate the laws of thermodynamics, and that the spontaneous origins of even the simplest proteins is improbably unlikely.

Both speakers were warmly applauded by the audience, but, due to the lateness of the hour, there were no questions from the listeners. The National Capital Area Skeptics members present at the debate, including President Chip Denman and Vice President Randy Lockwood, agreed that Max had done an outstanding job, on very short notice, against one of the most experienced debaters in the creationist camp. Although few, if

any, minds were changed in the audience, perhaps some of the listeners will be motivated to examine the evidence for evolution more closely, rather than listening only to creationist misinformation.

*Editor's Notes:*

■ Scientific responses to the points traditionally raised by Gish and other creationists will be covered in a special "Skeptic's Response" in the next issue of the *Skeptical Eye*.

■ This report could only touch on the highlights of this three-hour exchange. A videotape of the complete Max-Gish debate may be borrowed from Randy Lockwood—237-8591 (h), 778-6123 (o). Audio tapes of the debate and other presentations by Gish may be purchased from the Central Baptist Church, P.O. Box 696, Vienna, Virginia 22183.□

## Call for Skeptics Volunteers

In less than the time it takes to read this, you could take the first step toward getting even more satisfaction from your membership in the National Capital Area Skeptics. Whether you have been just champing at the bit to charge into the fray against the outrageous claims of pseudoscience or just wondering what it is that you might do to translate your skeptical concerns into tangible action, there's lots to do: Suggest ideas for future Skeptics programs and projects. Help publicize Skeptics events in your area. Lend a hand at lectures and seminars. Clip magazine and newspaper articles or record TV and radio programs to help keep us all aware of local and national issues. There is literally no limit to the ways you can contribute. So please call Skeptics Volunteer Coordinator Gary Stone by 9 pm any evening or weekend at (301) 470-1530 (it's a local call in the D.C. metro area) or write to him at PO Box 153, Annapolis Junction, Maryland 20701.

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Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring 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. I understand that my membership will be good for one year and will include a subscription to the *Skeptical Eye*.

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## UFOs in the USSR?

In mid-October, the Soviet news agency Tass reported a UFO visitation in the Russian city of Voronezh, a few hundred miles south of Moscow.

Phil Klass, leading skeptical UFO investigator and NCAS member, said the report is "about as credible as much that Tass has previously published about non-UFO matters." He suggested that perhaps the USSR, under its new perestroika policy, is planning to publish a new tabloid titled *National Pravda [Truth] Enquirer*. If so he believes the new tabloid will have to set higher standards. "Today's *National Enquirer* would never have published the recent tales, although perhaps some of its second-rate clones might have."

Other skeptical observers noted that the Soviets now appear to be having trouble with satellites at home as well as along their western border. □

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