

NCAS Philip J. Klass Award April 2009

For outstanding contributions in promoting
critical thinking and scientific understanding.



National Capital Area Skeptics

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About Philip J. Klass (1919-2005)



Philip J. Klass was one of the original conveners of NCAS in 1987 and was an important long-time mentor to our organization. In 1976 he, along with Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, James Randi, Ray Hyman, Martin Gardner, Paul Kurtz, Sidney Hook and others, was a founding member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), now called CSI, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. He was one of the world's foremost experts on UFOs.

Trained as an electrical engineer, Klass was senior avionics editor of *Aviation Week & Space Technology* for over thirty years. He received numerous awards for his work as a technical journalist, from such organizations as the Aviation/Space Writers Association and the Royal Aeronautical Society, and was named a Fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. He wrote one of the first books about spy satellites, *Secret Sentries in Space* (1971).

Klass was known for explaining UFO sightings with pragmatic explanations. Although his detractors styled him a "debunker," in fact, debunking was the consequence, not the purpose, of his efforts. He sought to investigate "flying-saucer" reports and thus convert UFOs (unidentified flying objects) to IFOs (identified flying objects) such as celestial bodies, research balloons, advertising planes, and even secret aircraft. His books on UFOs include *UFOs Explained* (1974), *The Real Roswell Crashed-Saucer Coverup* (1997), and *UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game* (1989).

In 1999, the International Astronomical Union named Minor Planet (asteroid) 7277 "Klass" in his honor.

NCAS created the Philip J. Klass Award in 2006. Previous recipients were Michael Shermer, James Randi, and Robert L. Park.

2009 NCAS Philip J. Klass Award Recipient



Paul Kurtz

Paul Kurtz's accomplishments extend across the realms of philosophy, humanism, publishing, editing, writing, education, the founding and chairing of organizations, and more. A common thread connects all of his achievements: a tireless devotion to improve the human condition by means of rational inquiry and the scientific method. Thus the NCAS Philip J. Klass Award for outstanding contributions in critical thinking and scientific understanding is fittingly presented to Kurtz, the person most responsible for the modern organized scientific skeptical movement that coalesced in the mid-1970s.

Belief in the occult and paranormal was markedly ascendant then, stoked by credulous and sensational media coverage of UFOs, ancient astronauts, psychics, Velikovsky's "worlds in collision," reincarnation, the "Bermuda Triangle," and other unfounded claims.

Kurtz, like many academicians, was troubled by this development, especially the continued uncritical dissemination of astrological charts, forecasts, and horoscopes by the media and by otherwise reputable newspapers, magazines, and book publishers. He, along with astronomer Bart Bok and science writer Lawrence Jerome, sponsored the statement "Objections to Astrology," first published in 1975 in the American Humanist Association (AHA) magazine Kurtz edited, *The Humanist*. Signed by nearly 200 prominent scientists, including 18 Nobel Laureates, the statement was submitted to newspapers across the U.S. and Canada, and attracted worldwide attention.

Encouraged by the success of "Objections," Kurtz formed an international "Committee to Scientifically Investigate Claims of Paranormal and Other Phenomena" (later called CSICOP and now CSI) in 1976. The primary thrust of the committee would be to encourage open, complete, objective, and careful examination of questionable claims concerning the paranormal and related phenomena, and to publish results of such research in its magazine, *Skeptical Inquirer*. The committee was derided by paranormalists for being "closed-minded" and by some skeptics who claimed that it was dignifying phenomena that did not deserve special attention, but the media had

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finally found an organized and effective skeptical voice to include in coverage of the paranormal.

Kurtz co-chaired the committee for its first year and has chaired it ever since. Although preceded by Belgium's Comité Para (founded 1948) and other skeptical organizations, it was CSICOP's eminent coalition of physical and social scientists, medical doctors, magicians, historians, journalists, and others, assembled and energized by Kurtz's dynamic leadership and farsighted vision, that ushered in the modern age of scientific skepticism.

Much is owed to Kurtz as well for the formation of independent local skeptics groups like NCAS. Under his leadership, CSICOP published a call for forming such groups, and provided them with invaluable guidance and material support to connect with other skeptics in their community and organize.

In addition to leading CSI, Kurtz is founder and chairman of Prometheus Books, now in its 40th year of publishing many of the leading authors of skeptical and freethinker works.

Kurtz is the author or editor of 48 books and over 850 articles and reviews, has appeared on major TV and radio programs around the world, been interviewed by and featured in many leading newspapers and magazines worldwide, has lectured widely in North America and overseas, and had papers read at the American Philosophical Association, American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Psychological Association, and other professional associations.

Paul Kurtz is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, chairman of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), and editor-in-chief of its *Free Inquiry* magazine. He is also founder and chairman of the Center for Inquiry, Transnational, comprising CSI, CSH, and other affiliates. Kurtz is a former Co-President of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). He received his BA from New York University, and his MA and PhD (1952) from Columbia University, is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Humanist Laureate and President of the International Academy of Humanism.

The National Capital Area Skeptics is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, educational and scientific membership organization that promotes critical thinking and scientific understanding.

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