
NEWS & COMMENT:
KLASS AT ASU

ParaNet Alpha 03/06 -- Philip J. Klass, billed as the world's foremost UFO debunker, lectured a small audience at Arizona State University's Neeb Hall last night.

The event was promoted by the Phoenix Skeptics, whose members constituted the majority of the audience. Several members of ParaNet were also in attendance.

Klass was introduced by Skeptic Ron Harvey as "The Sherlock Holmes of Ufology," and indeed, his investigative approach is methodical and detailed. He is responsible for successfully debunking some of the more mysterious and baffling UFO reports over the past 22 years.

To his credit, Klass began his lecture by debunking the myth that all UFO percipients are "kooks and nuts," saying that particular attention should be paid to reports made by credible witnesses such as pilots, astronomers, and other seasoned observers. He attempted to separate himself from those skeptics who would "dismiss all UFO reports out of hand."

The first half of the lecture was devoted to two famous cases which, according to Klass, encapsulated many elements of standard UFO sighting reports, mainly nocturnal lights and daylight "disks" (something of a misnomer, since all daytime object sightings, regardless of shape, are lumped under this category). The cases were of a May, 1968 multiple witness report centering on Nashville, TN, and a 1969 report of fast-moving daytime objects sighted by three sets of jet crews centered around St. Louis. The first case turned out to be the re-entry of a Soviet Zond spacecraft, and the second, according to Klass, was a bright meteor-

fireball, or bolide. Klass builds his case for the mundane nature of UFOs around these two sightings, because they exemplify many of his published "Ufological Principles," such as the fact that a majority of witnesses to an event CAN be mistaken in their descriptions; the fact that the human mind tends to fill in details that it doesn't see but expects, through societal archetypes, to find; and the fact that we tend to draw correlations between events where none may exist.

Extrapolating from these two stereotypical cases, Klass then attempted to explain the famous Mansfield/Coyne Helicopter case, which won the National Enquirer award for the most baffling UFO case of 1973. A slide showing the four primary witnesses receiving their National Enquirer checks drew the expected chuckles from some members of the audience, who behaved like good little Skeptics and snickered appropriately throughout the presentation.

The Mansfield case is one of the most oft-told in UFO literature, and details can be found in several sources, including two of Klass' four books, and a pamphlet available from the Fund for UFO Research, so I won't recount it in full here, but briefly, in October of 1973, four National Guardsmen flying North near Mansfield, OH in a Bell UH-1H helicopter had a nighttime encounter with an object which approached them from the east, threatened to collide with their chopper, hovered briefly, then flew off to the west where it disappeared. During the encounter, the pilot-in-command, Capt. (now Col.-ret.) Lawrence Coyne pitched the helicopter into an 800 ft. descent; when the encounter was over, he found he had actually CLIMBED from 1700 ft above sea level (MSL) to 3500 ft., and was still climbing at 1000 feet per minute. This unintentional climb has been attributed by many to some sort of "tractor beam" emanating from the UFO.

Making use of his "Ufological principles," Klass proceeded to debunk the case as being another bright meteor-fireball. He contended that Coyne subconsciously noticed that his descent was bringing him close to the ground, and at approx. 400 ft above ground level (AGL), brought the collective up and initiated an ascent.

All four men reported that the interior of the chopper was bathed in a green light while the object hovered above them. Klass points out that the windows on the top of the Huey are tinted green, and that the bright light of the fireball, caused by an envelope of ionized air, merely shone through the top windows, causing the "green" effect. The other anomalous elements of the report, the hovering, the structure, the temporary loss of radio contact with area airport towers, Klass dismissed with aplomb.

It would be a momentous job of demystification, if it were not for a few basic flaws in Klass' main argument, the most challenging being the possibility of a bolide of such duration going unnoticed by the rest of humanity.

Time is a crucial element in this case, for the duration of a bolide has an upper limit, as does the rate of climb of a Huey helicopter. While it has been demonstrated many times that percipients of sudden, extraordinary events have unreliable recall of the passage of time, some idea of the duration of the event can be gleaned from the fact that the Huey began descending from 2500 ft. MSL at the start of the event, reached 1700 MSL, then rose to 3500 MSL just after the event. The lowest amount of time acceptable to anyone is 45 seconds; most investigators agree, however, that the event lasted at least a minute. But let's take the 45 second figure.

In order for a bolide to even theoretically last this long, it would have to be travelling in the very upper reaches of the Earth's atmosphere,

where there is little friction to slow down the object or affect the arc of its trajectory. Recall that the object was first seen in the east, then disappeared on the western horizon. We can therefore say that, due to its great altitude and the amount of Earth's atmosphere it subtended, it would have to have been visible, not just over a large portion of Ohio, but over a large portion of the North American continent. As Klass points out, the event occurred during the height of the Orionid meteor shower, at just after 11PM -- a late hour, but not too late for avid skywatchers, of which there would surely be a great number. Yet NOT A LIVING SOUL REPORTED SEEING A BRIGHT METEOR-FIREBALL on that night.

When challenged on this point, Klass retorted by asking why no credible independent witnesses stepped forward to report a large UFO either. (A group of four witnesses DID attest to seeing the helicopter/UFO encounter some time later, however, their testimony is flawed in some respects, and hence cannot be considered reliable.) Ignoring for the moment the perceived unlikelyhood of alien spacecraft, it is much easier to believe that such a craft, operating at the low altitude of the helicopter over an area which Klass himself characterizes as sparsely populated, would go unnoticed, whereas a high-altitude bolide would be a spectacle most likely observed by thousands.

Count forty-five seconds off to yourself, and imagine that, while you're counting, a fireball is traversing the night skies. Now imagine no one seeing it.

Add to all this the fact that very few astronomers and meteor experts agree that a bolide event CAN last for that period of time. In answer, Klass characteristically trots out an event that occurred in 1972 over the Western part of the U.S., which was captured on 26 seconds of

film, arguing that it had to have lasted even longer in order for the photographer to notice it and ready her camera. The event (which occurred in broad daylight, over a more sparsely populated area of the country, and yet was reported by thousands) was characterized by Carl Sagan as something that happens "once in a century." Yet Klass has used the "bright meteor-fireball" device to explain SEVERAL cases throughout his three previous books. How many times can a once-in-a-century event occur since 1947?

In his book "UFO's: The Public Deceived" (Prometheus 1981), Klass states that, since he believes the chopper crew saw SOMETHING strange and are not making the whole thing up, the event can only be one of two things, a bolide or a real, honest-to-goodness alien starship. He begins his argument against the latter on the basis of facts and evidence, but when challenged, falls back on theory, relying on Science's characterization of alien visits as "unlikely." I must ask how one measures such unlikelyhood, absent any reference data on such visits. We DO have some idea of the unlikelyhood of 45-second bolides, however, and I am here to tell you that they are SO unlikely as to put Klass in the position of virtually endorsing, by his own words, the ET Hypothesis.

In the middle part of the lecture, Klass showed a slide of Dr. J. Allen Hynek, widely recognized as the father of scientific ufology. Klass strongly implied that Hynek's decision to switch from skeptic to proponent on the UFO issue was financially motivated. He related that Hynek drew \$150 a day as a consultant to Project Blue Book; when the Air Force shut down that project, Klass said, Hynek changed into a believer and drew up to \$2000 for lectures.

Klass' implication is nothing short of contemptible. He ignores the

fact that Hynek's path to advocacy of UFO research began long before the end of Blue Book; it can be traced to the aftermath of the 1966 Swamp Gas Incident in Dexter, MI. In addition, much of Hynek's lecture income was known to have gone back into UFO research.

Skepticism is a necessity in the badly muddled world of ufology, and much of Klass' work has served to define the boundaries and goal lines for would-be saucer seekers. But the *raison d'etre* of skepticism is Science, and Klass, who accuses Ufology of having none, seems to have forsaken Science in favor of his own myopic axe-grinding.

-- Jim Speiser

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