
Special Report



Astrology and the Presidency

IT WAS extraordinary. Astrology, an ancient but still immensely popular pseudo-science, was for a while on the front page of every newspaper and on every national network newscast. Political columnists and political cartoonists had a heyday. Time magazine made it a cover story. The revelations of the extent to which President and Mrs. Reagan used advice from astrologers for political scheduling (at the very least) was big news. It was fodder for everything from serious examinations of the political implications of using astrology in the White House and discussions of the scientific invalidity of astrology to endless jokes and laughter. Astrologers defended their craft and reveled in the publicity.

Our coverage begins with two essay columns, the first by CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz. These are followed by excerpts from Donald Regan's book, which brought this controversy to the fore, and comments from political columnists (many refreshingly skeptical), scientists, and the astrologers themselves. We then publish a challenge CSICOP sent to the Reagans' astrologer. And we conclude with a guide to recent scientific critiques of astrology, many published in the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.

Skeptic's Burnout: Hard Weeks on the Astrology Battle Line

“DO YOU ever get skeptic's burnout?” asked Barry Karr, CSICOP's astute young public-relations director. This question came at the end of a long, hard day during the particularly exhausting three weeks following Donald Regan's revelation of the Reagans' use of astrology at the White House.

The “Astrogate” story hit the CSICOP office like a bombshell and led to an extended barrage of calls from the press and radio and television representatives: “What do you think of this disclosure?” “Is astrology true?” “Can you recommend an expert to appear on our show?”

During those weeks, CSICOP provided guests for several dozen radio and television shows and newspaper interviews. With few exceptions, our spokesmen were the only ones who were both able and willing to comment authoritatively on belief in astrology.

“Yes, we knew the Reagans regularly consulted astrologers,” we responded. “No, we don't think there is any scientific evidence to support the claims of astrology. Indeed, all of the many tests conducted over the past decade have produced negative results.”

And we also got the old familiar questions: “But what harm does it do?” “Do you really think it is dangerous?” To which we replied: “If daily horoscopes are read for amusement, we can't see much harm. But if scheduling the signing of the INF treaty and other presidential dates are based on astrology, there is definitely something wrong. If astrology and other pseudoscientific beliefs are accepted by the political leadership, there can be serious implications. Certainly a reasonable level of scientific sophistication is necessary to solve the complicated problems facing society today.”

CSICOP's goal has been to attempt to balance untested claims with skeptical dissent based on scientific inquiry. We have not asked that newspapers drop their astrology columns. We have simply requested that newspapers and magazines carry a disclaimer along with their horoscope columns. Thus far, only 22 newspapers have been willing to take this step—more than 1,300 have not!

Our modest efforts notwithstanding, belief in astrology continues to grow. In 1976, 29 percent of the population claimed to believe in astrology, but by 1986 this figure had increased to 36 percent. Of course one reason for this is that “astrology sells.” It is a profitable business. Horoscopes are sold in much the same way as cornflakes, chewing gum, and beer.

Another reason for the popularity of astrology is that all too many television directors and producers either lack critical judgment about the paranormal or pander to public taste rather than exercising their responsibility to provide the public with the facts.

A recent Oprah Winfrey show illustrates this point. This popular daytime television talk-show presented a special program on astrology and asked Roger Culver, an astronomer at Colorado State University and a member of CSICOP's Astrology Subcommittee, to be a guest on the panel, and he agreed to appear. However, following the usual practice of television shows, Culver, the only skeptic on the show, was pitted against three astrologers, who were supported by an audience packed with believers. Culver, coauthor of the recently released *Astrology: True or*



False?—*A Scientific Evaluation* (an updated edition of *The Gemini Syndrome*), was placed in an unwinnable situation. Not only was he outnumbered, but when he said that science could find no credible evidence to support the claims of astrology, the vivacious Oprah asked why people should accept what scientists say when so many of them do not believe in God! Playing to the galleries, astrology overwhelmed astronomy.

Two weeks earlier, I gave an extensive 90-minute telephone interview to *People* magazine—which does not carry an astrology column. The reporter told me that his editors were willing to do a “hard-hitting” critique of astrology. I reviewed the major reasons science was skeptical and supplied him with the names of several astronomers and other scientists he could contact. The night the magazine went to press, a member of the magazine’s editorial staff called me to say that an entire page was being devoted to scientific objections to astrology, but when the story appeared a week later there was not one word of criticism. It featured interviews with Joan Quigley, Nancy Reagan’s astrologer, and other “astrologers to the stars.” When I later called to ask what had happened, I was told there had been “no space to run criticisms.”

Time and again we find the same thing. Sally Jessy Raphael, who hosts a popular syndicated daytime TV talk-show, devoted a recent program to a discussion of demonic possession, with four believers and a lone skeptic—Canadian journalist-magician Henry Gordon—and, again, the audience was almost unanimous in its support of the proponents.

It is small consolation that all of the programs are not like Geraldo Rivera’s recent “Geraldo” show, on which five astrologers were uncontested by any skeptical voice at all as they offered glowing testimony to the success of their predictions, or like a recent “Donahue” show that featured a Tarot-card reader, an astrologer, a spiritual counselor, a psychic medium, and a psychic—with not one skeptic. It’s an uphill battle today to offer even a semblance of reflective doubt about the claims that feed the public’s appetite for the paranormal.

Another graphic illustration of this is the book *The Haunted*, published by St. Martin’s Press, written by Robert Curran in collaboration with Jack and Janet Smurl and demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren. (See the review in this issue.) The book chronicles the events in the Smurls’ supposedly haunted home in West Pittston, Pennsylvania. (See *SI*, Winter 1986-87.) The most outrageous claim made by Jack Smurl was that he had been raped at least a dozen times by a demon and other preternatural beings. CSICOP’s team of investigators found there were natural causes to explain many of the events that allegedly took place in the house and that it was not necessary to attribute them to occult forces. Nevertheless, the publishers sent the Smurls and the Warrens on a 15-city media tour to sell the book.

Some publishers have apparently abandoned any pretense of objectivity. Regrettably, following the lead of the *National Enquirer*, the media industry is often more interested in high readership and a rosy bottom-line than in the truth of their authors’ claims. Bantam Doubleday Dell, publisher of many of Shirley MacLaine’s books, is owned by Bertelsmann, the huge German conglomerate that has often abandoned its standards of editorial responsibility in its quest for profits, and all too many other publishers do the same.

Representing Prometheus Books, I recently attended the annual American Booksellers Association convention, in Anaheim, California. I was struck by the fact that, although hundreds of books on paranormal topics were being promoted with considerable fanfare, books critical of such claims were only noticeable by their absence.



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Among the plethora of books supporting UFOs, astrology, psychics, channeling, and countless other New Age fads, Prometheus stood virtually alone in providing opposing views. Why have the larger publishers chosen not to publish skeptical critiques? The answer we hear over and over again is that they do not sell; only books that tout the paranormal make a profit. Alas, there is some truth to that pessimistic appraisal, but don't publishers have an obligation to present the truth?

Do we ever get "skeptic's burnout"? Well, we do feel somewhat like Sisyphus pushing a rock up a hill—and as soon as it gets near the top it rolls back down and we have to start all over again. But what if CSICOP did not exist? Imagine a situation in which there was no critical dissent at all. Psychics, astrologers, soothsayers, and gurus would no doubt cheer and make the most of it. Burnout or not, we still have work to do.

I am convinced that paranormal belief systems are the expression of deep-felt needs of the human psyche and that that is why they persist. Nevertheless, it is necessary to provide a critical alternative so that those who are interested in the scientific case can have the facts.

If someone claims wondrous powers, the world will beat a path to his door. If upon examination his claims are proved false, few are interested. Crowds will flock to a carnival when it comes to town. Jugglers and medicine men who hawk spurious products have a field day. Those who seek to sort out and evaluate these claims are drowned out by those rushing to buy the wares of the miracle mongers.

—Paul Kurtz

Paul Kurtz is the founding chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

The Fortune of Our Country

There's a rumor at the White House
and we don't know if it's true.
Does Nancy read Ron's horoscope
and tell him what to do?
Is it 7 come 11?
Is it I Ching for us all?
What's the fortune of our country?
Let's rub the crystal ball.

When Pluto's in ascension,
send missiles to Iran.
With Venus in the second house,
you pay the Contra man.
You take your foreign policy
and line it up with Mars,
and if it fails, you gotta know
it wasn't in the stars.

—The Fiasco Brothers, Albuquerque, N.M.