A Strategy For The Evaluation of Paranormal Phenomena

There seems to be a small but constant momentum within the Agency for investigation of paranormal phenomena including such things as Extra Sensory Perception, Astral Projection and Radionics. Since this momentum appears to have been continuous in the past, it seems reasonable to assume that it will continue in the future. Since claims of paranormal phenomena immediately generate opposing camps of believers and non-believers, any instigation of research into these areas immediately engenders debates, meetings, discussions, and memoranda. All of these activities consume man-power resources and any investigation will usually involve the commitment of fiscal resources. For this reason, this paper is presented to propose some guidelines for a strategy to allow for the appraisal of the appropriateness of resource dedication to whatever paranormal phenomena may be proposed in the future.

One of the driving forces for any proposed program in paranormal phenomena is always the carrot held out by proponents that the possession of such powers would have great utility to the intelligence community. If we assume that such powers are indeed real and can be harnessed for use by the Agency or the Intelligence Community, clearly there can be no argument with purported utility. Therefore, debate on

such an issue is inappropriate. The true focus for the debate should be on the validity of the claims made by proponents of the paranormal phenomena.

Another item which should be disposed quickly without major debate is that of the ability of the Agency to use something that it does not understand. Once again the arguments are really very simple. Obviously we can use something that we do not understand. Cave men used fire to cook food and warm caves for many years before the thermodynamics and chemical kinetics of combustion were suspected, known, or understood. Even today man uses gravity for many purposes, although there is still significant debate in the scientific community as to what causes gravitational attraction. However, when a phenomenon is not understood, it must be a reliable phenomenon to be trusted. The credibility of gravity is very, very high even though the theoretical underpinnings for gravitational attraction are not solid. The reason for this status is that human history has a great preponderence of observations in favor of objects falling toward the Earth and not away from the Earth. Paranormal phenomena which are not understood (or which cannot be explained) must achieve a similar level of reliability to attain the same level of credibility as a phenomenon such as gravity.

Given that there will be a proposal for the Agency to investigate some form of paranormal research in the future, the following is presented as a suggested strategy for deciding

on the justification for pursuing such research. This suggestion is put forward with the hope that it will stimulate discussion and dialogue among management and technical personnel to arrive at a strategy that can be implemented at a future time.

First, one must consider the evidence presented by a proponent of paranormal research. The body of evidence itself should be a consideration for the justification of research into the area. The volume of evidence, the number of observers of similar evidence, and the commonality of observation should all be qualitatively evaluated by impartial observers to arrive at some construct of opinion regarding the paranormal phenomenon.

Some critical aspects of the body of evidence should include the presence of witnesses to the claimed observations which are being presented as evidence. Probably the most compelling type of evidence would be first hand evidence presented by the proponent of such research. Additionally, one should consider the level of training and experience of the observer. This is not meant to imply in any way that someone not trained as a scientist is incapable of making an observation which is of major importance. However, the observation of phenomena by trained and experienced observers should be considered much more heavily than by the naive observer.

Another critical aspect of the data presented as evidence for a paranormal phenomenon must be the reproducibility

of that data. Reproducibility must be considered in light of the individuals who can reproduce it, the conditions under which any or all individuals can reproduce it and the nature of controls which can be imposed upon a situation where reproduction of the phenomenon is demanded. Evidence which requires that the audience take on faith the data or manifestations of the data, should be dismissed out-of-hand as evidence for paranormal phenomena.

The body of evidence presented to support a proposal for this type of research should be as free as possible from argument by analogy. If, indeed, there is to be presented a theoretical underpinning for these types of phenomena, then that theoretical underpinning should be able to stand on its own. It is not appropriate to argue, for instance, that a paranormal form of energy travels faster than the speed of light and cannot be measured just because one can make the statement that a thought may travel faster than the speed of light and no one has been able to measure the speed of a thought. Argument by analogy is really only appropriate in a positive sense but not in a negative sense.

It seems appropriate that the burden of proof for having the Agency involve itself in research into paranormal phenomena should be on the proponents of such research. Without getting into legalistic definitions this burden of proof should not be proof "beyond the shadow of a doubt" and indeed it may not even require a preponderance of evidence. However, the burden

must fall on the proponents to convince management and technical personnel in the Agency that, indeed, such research is appropriate and there is some plausible justification for entering into the expenditure of public monies toward this end.

It is the personal opinion of the author that the more exotic the claims made for any paranormal discipline that the more definitive should be the proofs and evidences presented to support the proposition for research into that area. Additionally, it is mandatory to require that a technical inability to explain all phenomena associated with the body of evidence shall not be taken as proof positive that there is validity to the phenomena. It does not seem reasonable to allow that the positive presence of a paranormal phenomena be provided by the absence of a firmly founded technical explanation for every detail.

Assuming that we have reached a situation where some level of investigation into paranormal phenomena is considered appropriate it is intended to now set forth some guidelines for validation of the claims, concepts, theoretical underpinnings for such phenomena. One criteria which should be applied is the concept of deniability. One of the foundations of the scientific method is that if one asserts a false hypothesis, then a false result will emerge from an experiment to test the hypothesis. This criterion of deniability should be applicable to experimental designs which attempt to explain the paranormal.

Another criterion for validation of a paranormal phenomenon should be the property of replication for that phenomenon. It is reasonable to assert that if such a phenomenon is real, then more than one independent observer/practioner can obtain the same results under the same conditions. This criterion has served the scientific community very well for several centuries; and, indeed, does not appear to be so unreasonable as to have it dismissed from consideration of paranormal research.

Yes but in a statistical sense?

A third criteria for such validation investigations should be the verifiability of the experimental data. By verifiability it is meant that the proponents and opponents of the phenomenon in question should be able to agree on the criteria which will substantiate or deny the existence of the phenomenon. Such a criterion will tend to remove validation experimentation from a situation whereby a negative or positive result can be refuted by the various parties to the debate.

Finally, any validation experimentation must be set up in such a way as to avoid the situation in which the opponents to a paranormal phenomenon are required to prove that it does not exist. The difficulty in proving a negative assertion, is so severe that such experimentation and argument can go on forever. Since it was stated that the burden of proof should be on the proponent to initiate paranormal research, this concept must be carried forward to any validation experiments to assure that any experiments are designed to prove the

existence of a phenomenon by positive observable details.

As a short example to illustrate the thinking that went into much of the above recommendations, the author doubts seriously that many scientists would argue with the fact that there may exist a sense in the human body which has not yet been discovered. They may, however, stop short of agreement if they were then asked to believe that this extra sense is one that cannot be measured, and therefore, it is for that reason that it has escaped detection (and will of course always escape detection). Skepticism about things like Extra Sensory Perception or abnormal sensitivities of individuals to various stimuli do not arise from a preconceived notion that it is impossible for such phenomena to exist; rather, it is skepticism which arises from an explanation which demands that an investigator believe in the existence of such data because there is no other explanation immediately available.

It is hoped that this short statement concerning paranormal research will stimulate sufficient discussion and dialogue to permit a reasonable and programmed response to a future assertion for Agency involvement in paranormal research. The author makes no claim that the suggestions in this paper for guidelines or approaches to this problem are all inclusive. If, however, they serve to generate such all inclusive and appropriate guidelines then this paper will de deemed successful in the mind of the author.