

ESSAY

Remembrance of Bob Jahn

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As a BBC television producer with a (wholly unauthorized and sub rosa) personal mission to inform the public of breakthrough discoveries rejected by the scientific establishment, my ears pricked up at the jungle drums coming from Princeton in the early 1980s. I had long wanted to make a program about ESP research, and it was Bob's data and academic status that helped convince my skeptical BBC bosses that it was high time *Horizon* (and its US sister *Nova*) took a look at the subject.

At the time, however, Bob was still Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, and, despite receiving a suitably effusive written invitation, he declined to take part. His reply was diplomatic, wishing me well with the TV program, but enabling me to read between the lines that he had been sat upon by the Princeton authorities. However, I did sneak in a reference to Bob in the final BBC program *The Case of ESP* [<https://youtu.be/h2Gog3xMluA>].

I finally "nailed" Bob televisually in 1993, when he agreed to be one of the candidates in my 6-part BBC series about dissident scientists. Called *Heretic*, the series also featured Linus Pauling, Rupert Sheldrake, Jacques Benveniste, Eric Laithwaite, and Hans Eysenck. Bob had by then been demoted from Dean, whereupon the University removed the publicity shackles, evidently deeming its reputation less vulnerable to the deranged research interests of a mere Professor. *Heretic: Robert Jahn* (1994) can be viewed on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/8A6pPLEzkhg>.

However, both the university and Bob's fellow scientists remained firmly tight-lipped about him, even off the record. The only senior colleague who agreed to an interview was Professor of Mathematics Geoffrey Watson. My impression was that Watson had a soft spot for Bob but regretted that a fine mind and career had been sacrificed on what he considered dead-end research. His view was brutally pragmatic: that, if no pharmaceutical drug would ever be approved on small deviations from chance results, how could Bob expect his similarly feeble findings to overturn the whole of science?

Bob himself was most welcoming, and very generous with his time and patience with a Limey producer/director who in retrospect was probably irritatingly demanding and over-enthusiastic. He completely opened up his

[in]famous PEAR laboratory to me and my New York camera crew.

Bob chose his private office as the location for recording the main interview. It was my first invitation to his inner sanctum, and I was staggered at what I beheld. It was like entering a child's playroom: Almost every shelf was peopled with 'cuddly toy' animals—not just teddy bears, but penguins, giraffes, lions, tigers. Any PR adviser would have kept TV cameras well at bay, as the spectacle was a clear own goal, exposing someone whose reputation was already on the floor to further potential ridicule.

I briefly contemplated pointing out his folly, but Bob was a man whose judgment one did not question. In any case, his office offered a privileged insight into the playful side of an otherwise somewhat austere public persona, which I decided my viewers should be made aware of. Nevertheless, I did most of the interview with close-ups (thus largely excluding the animals), finally revealing the soft-toy menagerie on a wide shot, and launching the obvious question. "I suppose this room expresses my delight at life, interesting things, pretty things, fun," explained Bob, "and when I was fortunate enough to bumble into a research topic that kept opening up such new ideas—such challenging ideas as this one did—there was a happiness there, too."