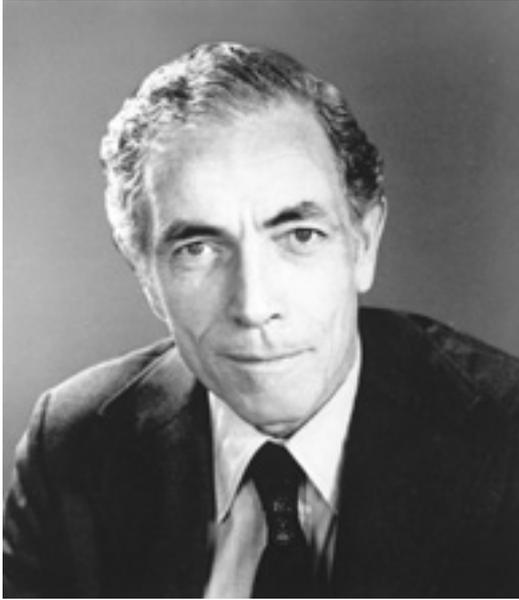


## R.I.P. Senator Pell

Written by James Randi  
Thursday, 08 January 2009 00:00

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The media has not been very kind to the memory of former U.S. Senator Claiborne Pell, who died last week in his 91st year. They recalled his odd obsession with UFOs, "remote viewing," ESP, "backward masking," and the spoonbender Uri Geller - who he firmly believed had psychic powers.

I trust that they will remember the student grant program that bears his name, and which helped so many students to obtain educations that might otherwise have been lost to them.

Pell's interest in ESP was so important to him that he assigned a Senate staffer to keep him posted on the subject. In 1987, Pell invited Uri Geller to Washington to put out "good vibrations" to Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. The New York Times obituary noted:

Mr. Pell's eccentricities and his ability to laugh at himself endeared him to colleagues and constituents.

I must say that the one and only time that I met the Senator, he was certainly eccentric, but he was not laughing. He showed up backstage, uninvited, on an occasion when I was being given some award or other in Washington, and my good friend Harry Blackstone Junior was there with me. Pell was accompanied by two huge bodyguards who scowled at me constantly, and tried to step between Pell and myself whenever I moved at all - even sideways. The Senator got right down to business. He produced a small pad of paper and a ball pen and challenged me. He told

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me how certain he was that Uri Geller could use ESP, and offered to show me proof that I could *not* - though I'd never claimed that I could. He stood well back from me, held up the pad, and drew or wrote something on the page facing him. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Harry Blackstone shaking his head to indicate that he'd not seen what Pell inscribed on the pad. That meant I was on my own, but Harry was laughing quietly as he saw the predicament in which I now found myself.

Senator Pell was feeling his oats, though he was trembling with what I perceived to be anger at my recalcitrance, and he was so agitated that his bodyguards were watching him very carefully. He peeled off the top sheet of paper, placed the pad in his inner pocket, folded up the single sheet, and placed it on the floor. He placed one foot firmly on top of the folded paper and announced, "Uri Geller was able to tell me what I had drawn, when I did exactly the same thing to test him. All right, Mr. Randi, what did I draw?"

Harry Blackstone had turned away and bolted for the door - for a very good reason. I'll come to that in a moment. Here I was, backstage with an angry Senator, two equally angry wrestlers, and for some reason that I will never understand, I was being challenged to do something that I had never claimed I could do! Pell had confronted his devil, and he was feeling victory within his grasp. While I stood there looking confounded - which is usually a sign that I'm not all confounded - Pell rambled on about how he was familiar with the technique of watching the end of the pencil or pen being used to do the writing - known in the trade as, "pencil-reading," he said he knew about picking up an impression from the sheet of paper underneath, and he assured me that his bodyguards had been instructed not to watch what he'd been drawing. Well! I managed to shake off my confusion and asked Pell what he would say if I successfully met his challenge.

The Senator was not about to be misled by this magician, this presumptuous clown who doubted the powers of his hero, Uri Geller. He ignored my question and simply repeated his own question: "What did I draw?"

A few times in everyone's life there occur moments when he knows he's already won the race, the prize is his, and all he has to do is step across the finish line. That moment had occurred for me. I seized a paper napkin that was on the refreshment table, uncapped my own pen, and made a drawing. I placed it face down on the floor, and asked Senator Pell to show me what he had drawn. It was a simple equilateral triangle, which I'm sure he chose in order to show how one of the most basic geometric shapes had confounded the clown. I looked at it with some interest, and saw that Pell was already reaching for the paper napkin. He turned it over.

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He began trembling. His two bodyguards stepped up quickly and held him by the arms. He was staring at a simple equilateral triangle, a precise duplicate of what he'd drawn to test me. He began to stammer, waved his finger at me in an accusatory manner, and said quite clearly, "*That was no trick!*"

" This experienced senior member of the U.S. Senate had not only been fooled by Uri Geller, and by a common magician, he'd ended up fooling himself. He just could not believe that he could have been wrong.

But perhaps you noticed what Senator Pell's question was? It was he who told me that the target was a drawing, not a word, not writing of any sort. He'd inadvertently given away that information in his question. But that information was hardly necessary for me to have solved the problem. By now, Harry Blackstone was back in the room. He'd gone for the door so that he could laugh in private, when he saw how naïve Senator Pell was, and he was as certain as I was that my answer would be correct. You see, Pell had simply lifted up the top page of the pad and peeled it off the top, clearly showing both Harry Blackstone and myself - upside down - the triangle that he had drawn!