

Where Are UFOs?

THE REPORTED SIGHTING of UFOs in the skies over Brazil recently brings to mind the fact that we haven't been hearing or reading much these days about this phenomenon.

The lack of news is a marked contrast to the 1950s and '60s, when reported UFO sightings were common currency of the news.

This leads to a question (holding in abeyance for the moment the jackpot question as to whether such things exist): Are there fewer UFOs around now, or are they just being seen less? One would like to have the opinion of J. Allen Hynek, an astrophysicist whose interest lent a gloss of scientific respectability to the matter — but alas, it is Dr. Hynek's death that has brought the subject to attention.

Our hunch is that he would have responded to inquiries along these lines: We don't know whether there are fewer UFOs or just fewer sightings, or maybe as many or even more UFOs but fewer sightings, or perhaps something else — so let's just study the relevant data, and meanwhile keep an open mind.

That was Dr. Hynek's theme. More knowledgeable than most, as a consultant to the Air Force UFO reports-assessment project, he argues for not dismissing reported sightings out of hand but applying rigorous scientific method to analysis of them. That is Allen Hynek's particular legacy.

It remains a good idea, one that puts to shame scientists who shrug off UFO reports as nonsense without having examined the evidence as they would evidence in their own fields of specialization.

There may be a new rash of reported sightings now that Brazilian officials and civilians are reporting seeing "pulsating, colored balls of light" that an Air Force pilot said "couldn't be anything now existing". Were that to happen, it would be good to know that trained minds were asking pertinent questions about the hows and whys of the phenomenon.