

WEEKEND PERSPECTIVES

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A 40-year mystery

BLOOMFIELD, Conn. — June 24, 1987, was the 40th anniversary of the as-yet-unsolved mystery of the flying saucers.

On that date in 1947, near Mt. Ranier, Washington, the pilot of a private plane, Kenneth Arnold, was searching for a lost U.S. Marine transport plane when he saw nine crescent-shaped, tailless objects. He measured their speed at well over 1,300 miles per hour, far faster than any jet planes then in existence.

They "flew erratic," he told newsmen later in Pendleton, Ore., "like a saucer would if you skip it across water." A newsman coined the term "flying saucer" and the name stuck.

News accounts of Arnold's sighting triggered a rash of similar reports and the newly created U.S. Air Force began what was to be a 22-year investigation of flying-saucer reports.

Recognizing that, like Arnold's, many of the mysterious sky objects weren't saucer-shaped, the USAF adopted the term "Unidentified Flying Object" or UFO.

A year after the Arnold sighting, Air Force investigators concluded that the saucers were of interplanetary origin. Their report was stiffly rejected by the USAF chief of staff, a rejection that set the tone for the next two decades of saucer "investigations."

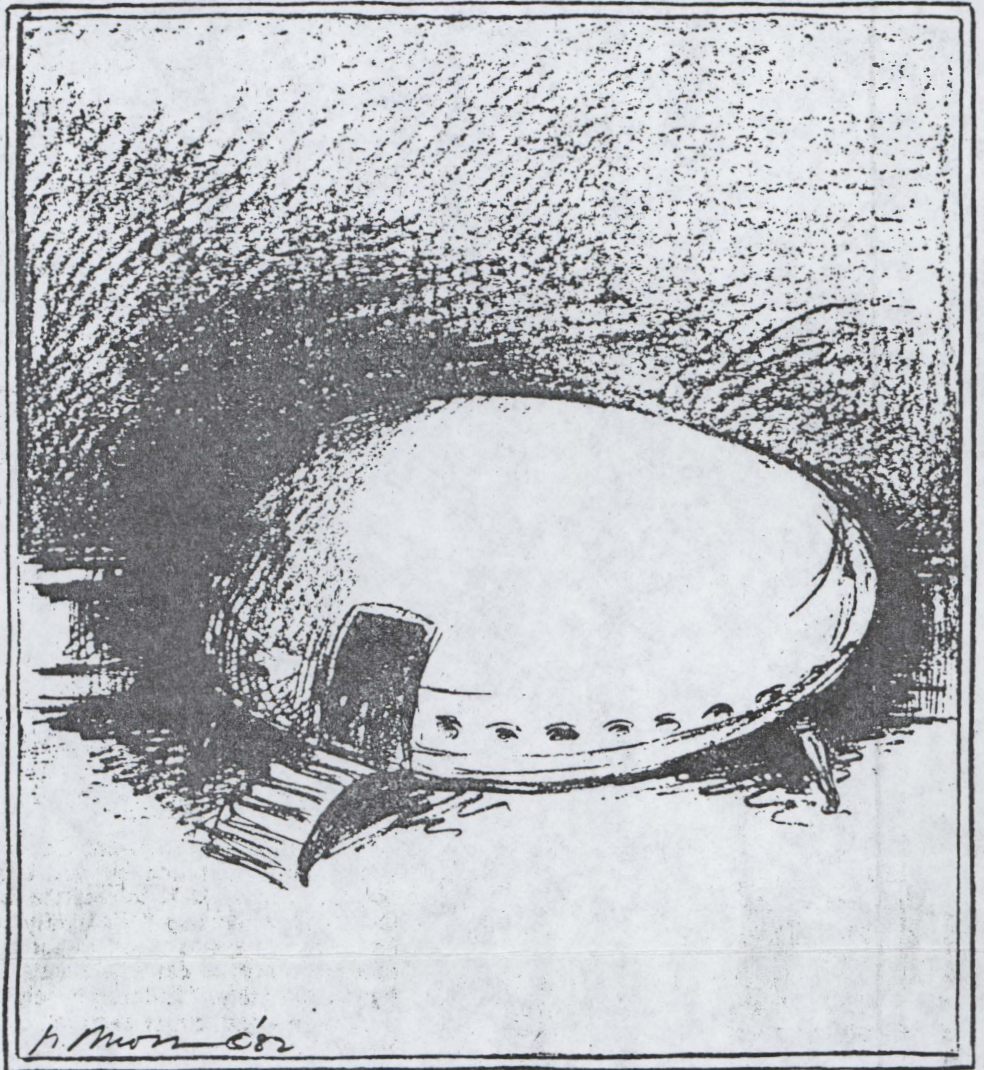
By determining that some 80-90 percent of all saucer sightings were misinterpretations of various conventional astronomical and aerial objects seen under unusual circumstances, and by harping on the few kooks — people who claimed to have flown to the Moon or met lovely ladies from Saturn — the Air Force hid the sightings it couldn't explain behind a "laughter curtain."

At times, the curtain slipped. Implying that airline pilots were flying drunk when they reported UFOs, and "solving" other sightings by blaming them on stars that hadn't even been visible resulted in a growing clamor by private UFO investigators and some scientists for an independent study of UFO reports.

When the Air Force summarily dismissed sightings by scores of Michigan college students as "swamp gas," the public, political and media outcry forced the government to sponsor an 18-month, \$550,000 study by a team of University of Colorado scientists headed by Dr. Edward Condon, a respected physicist.

But the study's objectivity quickly became questionable when Condon bluntly remarked, "My attitude right now is that there's nothing to it."

A year later, Condon's 1969 study report, despite listing 30 percent of the cases studied as unsolved, concluded that "further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation science will be



Point of view

advanced thereby."

The Air Force, with a sigh of relief, promptly stopped its investigations, sent its files to dead storage and dismissed astronomer Dr. J. Allen Hynek, their part-time science consultant.

For their part, the UFOs refused to go away.

Sighting reports have always been global in nature. England has reported more sightings per square mile of territory than has the United States. In China, UFOs were suspected of being Soviet spy devices, while the Soviets claimed UFO "fever" was a capitalist provocation to keep up the manufacture of war materials.

Peasants in remote areas of Third World countries knew nothing of the political and scientific arguments over UFOs, but they reported seeing them nonetheless.

And so the mystery continues today, only compounded now by a new and disturbing angle.

Almost since Arnold's sighting, some UFO reports have included claims that human-like beings were seen in or near landed UFOs. Such claims were almost universally rejected, scorned along with those tales of

space trips in flying saucers. But while it is one thing to see a supermarket tabloid that screams, "I Was Kidnapped by UFO Aliens" — we expect that of such papers — it is disquieting to learn that a growing number of sane, sober, publicity-shy people, both here and overseas, have made similar claims.

Their reports, made quietly to UFO investigators and not to the news media, have been remarkably consistent. They tell of abductions by small, gray-skinned beings who subjected them to apparent physical examinations.

While it can be argued that some abductees may have generated their stories from subconscious memories of those tabloid tales, no evidence of this has been found among those who have been professionally examined by doctors and psychiatrists. Nor can that argument hold for overseas abduction reports.

This leaves us with two uncomfortable possibilities. The abductions are real events, imperfectly recalled, or they represent the visible tip of a growing, worldwide psychosis unprecedented in psychiatric history. Either possibility demands compassionate professional study, not the shallow cynicism of sneering skeptics.

Forty years and no solution. Isn't it time we had a truly objective and scientific study of all aspects of these UFO reports?

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