

Letters

UFO's Merit Scientific Study

Twenty years after the first public furor over UFO's (called "flying saucers" then) reports of UFO's continue to accumulate. The Air Force has now decided to give increased scientific attention to the UFO phenomenon. Thus I feel under some obligation to report to my scientific colleagues, who could not be expected to keep up with so seemingly bizarre a field, the gist of my experience in "monitoring the noise level" over the years in my capacity as scientific consultant to the Air Force. In doing so, I feel somewhat like a traveler to exotic lands and faraway places, who discharges his obligation to those who stayed at home by telling them of the strange ways of the natives.

During my long period of association with the reports of strange things in the sky, I expected that each lull in the receipt of reports signaled the end of the episode, only to see the activity renew; in just the past two years it has risen to a new high. Despite the fact that the great majority of reports resulted from misidentifications of otherwise familiar things, my own concern and sense of personal responsibility have increased and caused me to urge the initiation of a meaningful scientific investigation of the residue of puzzling UFO cases by physical and social scientists. I have guardedly raised this suggestion in the literature (1) and at various official hearings, but with little success. UFO was a term that called forth buffoonery and caustic banter; this was both a cause and an effect of the lack of scientific attention. I speak here only of the puzzling reports; there is little point to concern ourselves with reports that can be easily traced to balloons, satellites, and meteors. Neither is there any point to take account of vague oral or written reports which contain few information bits. We need only be concerned with "hard data," defined here as reports, made by sev-

eral responsible witnesses, of sightings which lasted a reasonable length of time and which were reported in a coherent manner.

I have strongly urged the Air Force to ask physical and social scientists of stature to make a respectable, scholarly study of the UFO phenomenon. Now that the first firm steps have been taken toward such a study, I can set forth something of what I have learned, particularly as it relates to frequently made misstatements about UFO's. Some of these statements which lead to misconceptions are:

1) *Only UFO "buffs" report UFO's.* The exact opposite is much nearer the truth. Only a negligible handful of reports submitted to the Air Force are from the "true believers," the same who attend UFO conventions and who are members of "gee-whiz" groups. It has been my experience that quite generally the truly puzzling reports come from people who have not given much or any thought to UFO's.

2) *UFO's are reported by unreliable, unstable, and uneducated people.* This is, of course, true. But UFO's are reported in even greater numbers by reliable, stable, and educated people. The most articulate reports come from obviously intelligent observers; dullards rarely overcome their inherent inertia toward making written reports.

3) *UFO's are never reported by scientifically trained people.* This is unequivocally false. Some of the very best, most coherent reports have come from scientifically trained people. It is true that scientists are reluctant to make a public report. They also usually request anonymity which is always granted.

4) *UFO's are never seen at close range and are always reported vaguely.* When we speak of the body of puzzling reports, we exclude all those which fit the above description. I have in my files several hundred reports which

are fine brain teasers and could easily be made the subject of profitable discussion among physical and social scientists alike.

5) *The Air Force has no evidence that UFO's are extra-terrestrial or represent advanced technology of any kind.* This is a true statement but is widely interpreted to mean that there is evidence against the two hypotheses. As long as there are "unidentifieds," the question must obviously remain open. If we knew what they were, they would no longer be UFO's—they would be IFO's, Identified Flying Objects! If you know the answer beforehand, it isn't research. No truly scientific investigation of the UFO phenomenon has ever been undertaken. Are we making the same mistake the French Academy of Sciences made when they dismissed stories of "stones that fell from the sky"? Finally, however, meteorites were made respectable in the eyes of science.

6) *UFO reports are generated by publicity.* One cannot deny that there is a positive feedback, a stimulated emission of reports, when sightings are widely publicized, but it is unwarranted to assert that this is the sole cause of high incidence of UFO reports.

7) *UFO's have never been sighted on radar or photographed by meteor or satellite tracking cameras.* This statement is not equivalent to saying that radar, meteor cameras, and satellite tracking stations have not picked up "oddities" on their scopes or films that have remained unidentified. It has been lightly assumed that although unidentified, the oddities were not unidentifiable as conventional objects.

For these reasons I cannot dismiss the UFO phenomenon with a shrug. The "hard data" cases contain frequent allusions to recurrent kinematic, geometric, and luminescent characteristics. I have begun to feel that there is a tendency in 20th-century science to forget that there will be a 21st-century science, and indeed, a 30th-century science, from which vantage points our knowledge of the universe may appear quite different. We suffer, perhaps, from temporal provincialism, a form of arrogance that has always irritated posterity.

J. ALLEN HYNEK

Dearborn Observatory, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60201

Reference

1. *J. Opt. Soc. Amer.* 43, 311 (1953).

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