

ASTRONOMY AND THE FLYING SAUCER

UFO UPDATE

By James Oberg

Why aren't professional astronomers reporting UFOs? If extraterrestrials really are visiting our planet, shouldn't astronomers be the first to know?

The question is much more complex than that. Astronomical telescopes peer deep into the universe, but they cover very small areas of the sky (airplanes, for example, rarely appear). Moreover, astronomers these days don't spend much time looking through telescopes, preferring instead to examine photographic plates or watch closed-circuit-tv monitors.

Those few reports on file read like everybody else's. Astronomers, more familiar than the average person with sky phenomena, do tend to report fewer "unidentified" sightings, but they still from time to time report UFOs.

According to a survey of astronomers' opinions concerning UFOs, conducted in 1976 by Dr. Peter Sturrock of Stanford University, 70 of the 2611 astronomers polled replied that they had "witnessed or obtained an instrumental record of an event which (they) could not identify and which may be related to the UFO

phenomenon." This figure of less than 3 percent represents only about one quarter of all those Americans who claim to have seen UFOs.

More than 90 percent of average cases readily yield to prosaic explanations. The residue of "unexplaineds" possibly would be higher for astronomers, since they might be expected to recognize sky phenomena that could mislead ordinary citizens. But Sturrock did not investigate those reports sent to him, since that was beyond the scope of his study.

Still, the astronomers' stories are intriguing. Many such cases involved "nocturnal lights" for which there could have been numerous explanations (one case ultimately was identified as a distant rocket launch, which UFO investigators were reluctant to accept), but some of these were definitely noteworthy. In particular, several astronomers reported seeing lights hover motionless for many minutes, only to suddenly shoot up into the sky and vanish. Other lights appeared in bizarre formations, executing enigmatic maneuvers. Similar-sounding cases from other witnesses, when investigated, have yielded explanations, but these stories

continue to sound strange nonetheless.

Some "classic" flying saucers were reported. An astronomer and his family watched a "silvery disc-shaped object" with "bluish-green lights at the rim and a red light at the center" zip over their car shortly after sunset one summer. A glowing sphere was seen to dance around a tall tree one night (possibly it was ball lightning, but scientists do not really understand ball lightning, either!). A flying platform complete with rotating radar antenna reportedly buzzed the Princeton University campus one evening in April 1969. A flat silver-gray disc flew in front of an astronomer driving along a mountain road in New Mexico; his truck stalled when he tried to speed up after the object.

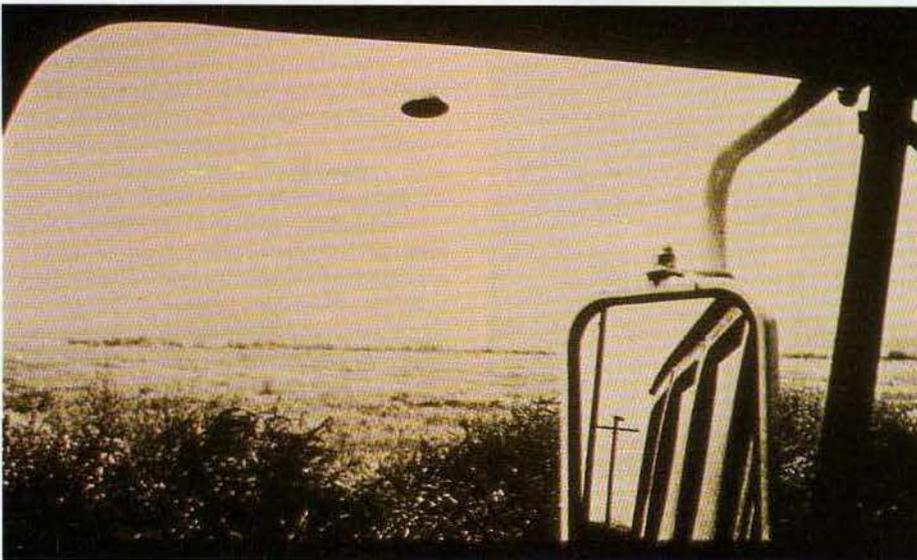
While fascinating, these cases have not actually been checked by experienced UFO investigators. Indeed, they probably never will be. Such stories do show, however, that astronomers see UFOs like everybody else—but much less frequently, despite their greater attention to the sky.

One "identified flying object" (or IFO) is a testament to the observer's acute perception—and to the element of luck that often is the only way some baffling cases ever get solved. While driving along the coast in daylight near Pensacola, Florida (some 20 years ago), the astronomer noticed a bright aluminum-hued flying saucer in the sky ahead of him. The sharply outlined disc was about the width of the full moon.

But as the man drove on, the "saucer" faded from view, without moving. Carefully scanning the sky where the UFO had been seen, the astronomer noticed a very thin cloud layer. He concluded that he had been watching a reflection, evidently from an inversion layer (such thermal effects have led to numerous reports of "shiny silvery discs"). The UFO had been a phantom: It had not been an object, nor was it ever flying, and it was now no longer unidentified.

There is, however, one phase of astronomical research that relates directly to the UFO question. These are so-called "full-sky" searches for meteors and

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Authenticity of Rex Heflin photo (above) is subject of internecine battle among UFO buffs.

artificial satellites. Astronomers on such projects are not concerned with dim and distant galaxies. They want to find—and track—light in the night sky, anywhere in the sky.

Since most UFO sightings occur at night, they should theoretically be visible to full-sky searches. Better yet, such UFOs should have been recorded on the scientists' calibrated photographic film. Here, expert opinion is divided. Some insist that unidentified objects *have been* photographed by such projects, with the results stashed away quietly, or burned. Other pro-UFO specialists argue that UFOs, which tend to be localized and low-level manifestations, could not have been on such photographs in the first place.

Scientists connected with full-sky searches dispute both these points of view and invite their pro-UFO colleagues to examine the photographic file and produce their own hard evidence (a challenge that so far has been declined, since the effort could be extremely expensive and time-consuming). Arguments that UFOs would not show up on astronomical scans are dismissed as after-the-fact rationalizations, since many UFO groups have for years urged the funding of just such sky surveys in an effort to obtain reliable documentation of the UFO phenomenon.

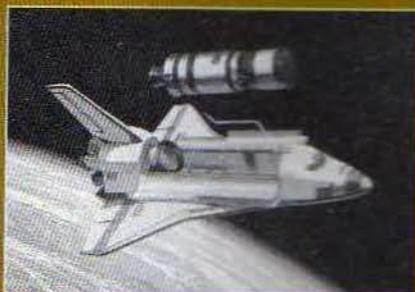
The negative opinion of most astronomers is summarized by noted skywatcher Dr. Carl Sagan. Writing on UFOs for the *Encyclopedia Americana*, Sagan described a sky survey conducted at the Harvard observatory in the mid-1950s: "These observations by professional astronomers were made in a locale and period characterized by extensive reports of unidentified flying objects. No unexplained objects were detected, despite the fact that rapidly moving objects were being sought in the study of meteors. Similar negative results, obtained by large numbers of astronomers, help to explain the general skepticism of astronomers toward flying saucers."

Dr. J. Allen Hynek disputes this conclusion. Referring to the Moonwatch sky-survey project (with which he was personally affiliated in the late '50s), Hynek claimed in 1973: "I know that during the satellite-tracking mission we picked up a number of things that appeared on the films but were never tracked down. A person who says that the Baker-Nunn cameras never spotted anything is just dead wrong, because I know they did. We just didn't bother about it. It would have been too much work to investigate some strange lights."

But were these strange lights UFOs? If someone *had* bothered to investigate, would the "strange lights" have been explained?

Other astronomers from the same satellite-tracking project dispute Hynek's recollection of mysterious objects 15 years be-

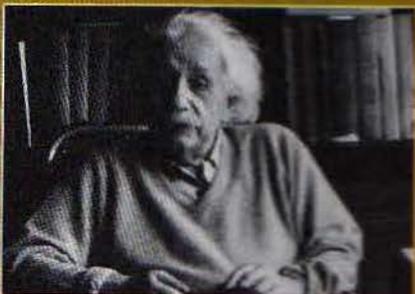
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TICKET TO SPACE—How about a different kind of vacation? First a flight on a rocket ship, with incredible views of the planet Earth sliding past your window. Then an overnight stay in a space hotel where you—and your wife, lover, friends, and family—can perform weightless acrobatics in the privacy of your own room. Science fiction? Perhaps now, but not for long. Space expert G. Harry Stine, in the March *Omni*, dates the beginnings of space tourism a mere twenty years down the road. Stine examines not only the hardware needed for space tourism but the economics as well, and finds convincing evidence that NASA—or somebody else in the rocket business—will be selling tickets to space by the late 1990s.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW/ARTHUR C. CLARKE—"There's a tremendous amount of traffic going on around the universe, and I'm quite sure that when one vehicle arrives here, we'll know about it. But the universe is so huge, it's hard to believe that there can be so much traffic in this local area." From his villa atop a mountain on the island of Valhalla in Sri Lanka, the dean of science-fiction writers, Arthur C. Clarke, provides *Omni* with rare insights into extraterrestrials, space colonization, underwater exploration, and paradises both artificial and real. *Omni* readers will be able to slip into the world Clarke knows better, perhaps, than anyone else: the future.

THE CLONE DOCTOR—Perhaps the biggest news story of 1978 was science writer David Rorvik's announcement that a human being had actually been cloned. The scientific community immediately labeled the story a hoax, claiming that the necessary technology for cloning was not yet available. To find out the truth, *Omni* sent Bill Stuckey to Vermont to profile maverick medicine man Landrum Shettles. According to him, cloning not only is possible, it's easy.

EINSTEIN'S LEGACY—Next month marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Albert Einstein. To commemorate this event, *Omni* profiles the brilliant physicist who brought us nuclear energy, predicted black holes, measured the atom, explained the solar cell, described the limits of our senses, and nearly invented the laser.

THE WORLD'S HARDEST I.Q. TEST—Designed to measure the top 2 percent of the top 2 percent, it is the most difficult test of intelligence yet devised. That's the bad news. The good news is that the test requires no supervision, and you can take as long with it as you like. Called the Lohgdon Adult Intelligence Test, it appears in its entirety in the next *Omni*, so sharpen your pencils.

DELPHIC POLL RESULTS—In the October *Omni*, we asked our readers to look into their crystal balls and participate in our first Delphic Poll. The response was overwhelming, and the tabulations are now complete. See the results in the next *Omni*.



While reaping wheat fields near Tooligee Hills, Australia, farmer Robert Habner discovered a UFO "trace" or crater measuring three meters in diameter. Later analysis of the trace proved inconclusive.

fore. "We never saw anything that couldn't be identified as aircraft," claimed a colleague of Hynek's from Northwestern University. Another scientist went further: "Early in the program there were occasional contrails, film problems, mechanical failures, jarred or loose optics, and other occurrences. But these declined almost to zero as the professionalism of the camera crews grew."

Hynek was mistaken, his colleagues insist, in claiming that these anomalies "were never tracked down." There was in fact an unofficial program "to seek explanation for occasional blips noticed on the Baker-Nunn frames." The professional conclusion was that they were "Eastman objects," or flaws in the film or developing process.

Dr. Frederick Whipple, former director of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Laboratory (SAO) and Hynek's boss on the Moonwatch project, also flatly disputes Hynek's claims of UFOs on the Baker-Nunn-camera exposures. Wrote Whipple, "The files and photographs of the SAO programs for satellites and meteors are, and have been, completely available anytime for an investigation of Dr. Hynek's imagined 'hidden' UFOs. He, of course, has known this all these years. The reason that he has done nothing about it is obvious. He knows that he would find nothing."

Dr. Whipple's interpretation of Hynek's motives may appear harsh. There are, after all, literally square kilometers of film in the Smithsonian vaults, and a comprehensive search and evaluation could take thousands of man-hours. UFO researchers have to date been unable to afford this effort, despite the promise of scientifically documented UFO evidence. Full-sky search photographs are still waiting and, perhaps as yet unrecognized by the skeptical world, may reveal crucial evidence for the reality of unidentified flying objects.

Or perhaps not. UFO theorist Jacques Vallee claims to have pointed out a problem: "Many astronomers must have known what I knew from my days at the Paris observatory, namely that we were tracking unidentified objects, and even photographing them. There were films, too." And what happened to all this UFO evidence? French scientists allegedly destroyed it all, in Vallee's estimation, out of fear of the unknown.

But perhaps UFO buffs would believe the assurances of another astronomer who had served on the satellite-survey project. In 1959, he was asked about any flying saucers that the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory might have picked up on their Baker-Nunn cameras, and he dismissed that idea as nonsense: "I can quite safely say that we have no record of ever receiving from our Moonwatch teams any reports of sightings of unidentified objects which had any characteristics different from those of an orbiting satellite, a slow meteor, or of a suspected plane mistaken for a satellite."

That astronomer's name was Dr. J. Allen Hynek. The statement appeared in a section of Edward Ruppelt's book *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (Doubleday, 1959), which was later dropped from reprints because of its skeptical conclusions. Hynek's statement was rescued from oblivion by St. Louis UFO researcher David Schroth, who found the change in Hynek's opinion over the years quite puzzling.

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A tenet of faith among UFO buffs is that the government is holding secret files, perhaps even conducting a secret study project, regarding UFOs. Despite numerous government denials, many buffs are insistent that Uncle Sam knows something they don't, particularly in light of recent lurid allegations concerning federal secrets and cover-ups. Perhaps there really could be important files with secret UFO

information stashed away somewhere.

Others caution that even if such information may have been classified, lost, or destroyed by the government, there still is no reason to suppose that any unique or conclusive data have been kept from civilian UFO researchers. An example of how data can become innocently unavailable is the current state of the Blue Book files: They have been so badly scrambled by years of research visits, without necessary refiling and sequencing, that a large portion of the folders are hopelessly lost somewhere among the hundreds of boxes of documents—and no one knows how to find them.

Under statutes of the Freedom of Information Act, UFO specialists have been attempting to extract UFO-related documents from the CIA, the air force and navy, the FBI, the State Department, and other agencies. Representatives of the Phoenix-based "Ground Saucer Watch" UFO group filed legal suits last year to seek out such documents; their inquiries have been taken over by another group, founded for the specific purpose of declassifying government UFO material. This group is "Citizens Against UFO Secrecy" (CAUS), based in New York.

The main goal of CAUS investigators is to uncover anything the government may not have told the public about UFO activities, and to determine whether the government is continuing UFO research a decade after the air force's Project Blue Book was terminated (and the government publicly washed its hands of the whole UFO question).

So far, much of this hitherto secret information is intriguing, but not spectacular or earthshaking. No "smoking gun" (or "stashed saucer") has been found. Top officials in government appear to have been as baffled by the UFO phenomenon as anyone else, all the while issuing bland assurances to the public that the situation was well in hand. Internally, however, government attitudes ranged from naive credulity to paranoid suspicion to knee-jerk hostility. The government was evidently working with no better data than that possessed by the general public.

Even today, according to CAUS Director W. Todd Zechel, reports of unidentified aerial activity from government sensors and from foreign sources continue to be routinely distributed among numerous government agencies. Zechel also admitted that there is so far no evidence of ongoing investigations regarding civilian UFO sightings, or any evidence of the existence today of a special office devoted exclusively to UFOs.

Instead, realizing that most UFO incidents do have prosaic explanations and that many of these explanations are definitely of interest to specific government agencies (unidentified aircraft, as an example, would be pertinent to the missions of the air force, the FBI, and possibly the Drug Enforcement Administration), the

reports appear to be routinely circulated to a standard mailing list, just in case any particular agency might find something of unique interest.

Zechel, who has recently become a leading figure in UFO research because of his role in these Freedom of Information suits, has been pleased with the results so far, even though at least another thousand pages of data are still being cleared for release. "The government said it had no further secret UFO files, and that it was no longer interested in UFOs. What we've dug up so far contradicts these assertions," says Zechel.

The question remains: Despite what these "secret UFO files" reveal about the government's eagerness to classify its own confusion, what do they contribute to the understanding of the UFO phenomenon itself? Thousands of cases are already on public record; finding a few more will not really help (and indeed, many of the "secret government files" may actually concern legitimately classified military operations, which led to some public UFO flaps).

UFO experts realize that there is as yet no hard government evidence that could substantially revise the publicly available body of UFO data. Still, if only to satisfy curiosity and nagging doubts, the CAUS efforts appear useful. Helpful information, whose utility might not have been recognized in the narrow considerations that led to its classification, may still be found. A more accurate, if less flattering, image of government-sponsored UFO research may also emerge. And one more open question in the still-baffling UFO phenomenon may be answered.

Another key issue in the question of "government UFO secrets" is the threat of federal prosecution to those who disclose UFO data. Although UFO buffs refer ominously to a number of tough-sounding government regulations, in actual fact there is no record of any individual's ever having been prosecuted for talking about UFO sightings. Still, many people who claim privately to have "startling UFO stories" will not allow their names to be used or will assure UFO researchers that they know a lot more but cannot tell.

UFO investigators are generally skeptical of such claims. Some of these stories, when checked out for corroboration, prove to be frauds or honest memory mistakes. The stories as a body are generally contradictory, and are often third- or fourth-hand.

An aspect of this issue also deals with the question of whether all UFO reports sent to the air force actually ended up in the Blue Book files (files that have been available to researchers for years, with names of most witnesses deleted to conform to federal privacy laws). Some UFO researchers have collected a series of cases that were officially reported in the '50s but never seem to have made the Blue Book registry.

One such story is told by former as-

tronaut Gordon Cooper. While at Edwards AFB in the mid-'50s, Cooper relates, he led a team of observers who photographed a landed UFO in the desert. Their films were sent to Washington for study and mysteriously vanished.

Skeptics point out that there could be entirely reasonable (and nonextraterrestrial) explanations for such disappearances of data: The government knew exactly what the sightings were about. Far from describing alien spaceships, these theories suggest, the UFO reports were based on misperceptions of legitimately classified top-secret military maneuvers or aircraft tests.

To resolve this ambiguity, UFO researchers last year called on President Carter to fulfill his campaign pledge of full disclosure of government UFO files by issuing an executive order waiving any federal prosecution of citizens who claim to have UFO information but are afraid to publicly disclose it. Such a presidential "pardon" of would-be UFO witnesses could go a long way toward opening up new sources of data, observers believe.

As of early 1979, there had been no reply from the White House.

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Although some groups, notably Ground Saucer Watch and Citizens Against UFO Secrecy, have been attempting to extract UFO documents from the U.S. government for publication, they too have been criticized for keeping documents to them-

selves that do not support conspiratorial theories of government UFO cover-ups. In other words, some UFO groups themselves may be guilty of covering up hitherto unreleased information.

In a news release issued last October, top UFO skeptic Philip J. Klass blasted CAUS for selective release of material obtained from their Freedom of Information suits. CAUS's director, wrote Klass, "was guilty of withholding crucial information" from other UFO groups when he continued to insist that he had evidence of a "crashed saucer" which the government had allegedly hidden away in 1948. In fact, Klass continued, "CIA documents declassified in April 1977 and in the possession of CAUS officials show that no such incident was known to ... top officials of the U.S. government as of January 1953." In other words, CAUS allegedly had documents contradicting its public statements but didn't inform other researchers or the public at large.

Todd Zechel, speaking for CAUS, rejected Klass's allegations. "We are not committed to any preconceived ideas about what is in these files," he said in an interview a few months ago. "If the documents convince us that there is no 'crashed saucer,' we'll say so."

And so the controversy continues. The "crashed saucer" has not yet been shot down and thus still flies high in the hearts of UFO enthusiasts everywhere. ∞

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