

## UFO UPDATE

By E. Lee Spiegel and Karen Ehrlich

**H**ave UFO studies yielded any worthwhile results? True believers and hard-core skeptics met in Washington, D.C., recently in a rare, balanced attempt to find the answer.

Sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution's Resident Associate Program, the event lacked the carnival atmosphere of most UFO gatherings, and the vendors of UFO paraphernalia were refreshingly absent. It was orchestrated by Frederick Durant, former special assistant to the director of the National Air and Space Museum. Durant's unwavering neutrality kept the speakers and audience of nearly 300 Smithsonian associates in line, on target, and on time.

The UFO proponents were astronomer J. Allen Hynek, scientific director of the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS) and former Air Force science adviser on UFOs; Allan Hendry, chief investigator at CUFOS; and Dr. Bruce Maccabee, a U.S. Navy physicist and chairman of the Fund for UFO Research.

On the other side were NASA engineer James Oberg, a frequent contributor to

this column; Robert Sheaffer, a founder of the UFO subcommittee of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICP); and Philip J. Klass, senior avionics editor of *Aviation Week and Space Technology* and chairman of the CSICP subcommittee.

Durant started the symposium with a question: "What has been learned about UFOs after one third of a century of investigation?" The answers were fairly predictable, but they set the stage for drama later in the meeting.

According to Hynek, UFO studies have been fruitful, even though the mystery remains unsolved: We have gathered the background data we need in order to find an answer. "We have learned that there is no special type of person who makes the UFO report," he said. "They represent a good cross section of the population. We've learned that people can honestly be fooled, even persons of considerable training. Also, the stranger the experience, the greater the reluctance to report." We have made a good beginning, Hynek said, but more professional work is necessary.

Sheaffer said that any such work will be wasted. "What we have learned is that UFOs will invariably outwit anyone who tries to corner them, as telepathies, fairies, ghosts, and similar phenomena have done for far longer than UFOs. UFOlogy is a failed, would-be science."

And Klass pointed out that "there is not, to my knowledge, a single photograph showing a craftlike object that does not have a taint of suspicion. UFO promoters have been able to come up with nothing stronger than unexplained cases."

Inquiry filled the five-hour symposium. One of the highlights was a film shown by Oberg. In it he aptly showed how misinterpreted window reflections in U.S. spacecraft had ended up as banner headlines in the *National Enquirer*. "Aliens on the Moon when We Landed" and "Crippled UFO Orbits Earth" were grossly inaccurate reporting. "This kind of exploitation is very damaging to UFO studies," Oberg warned.

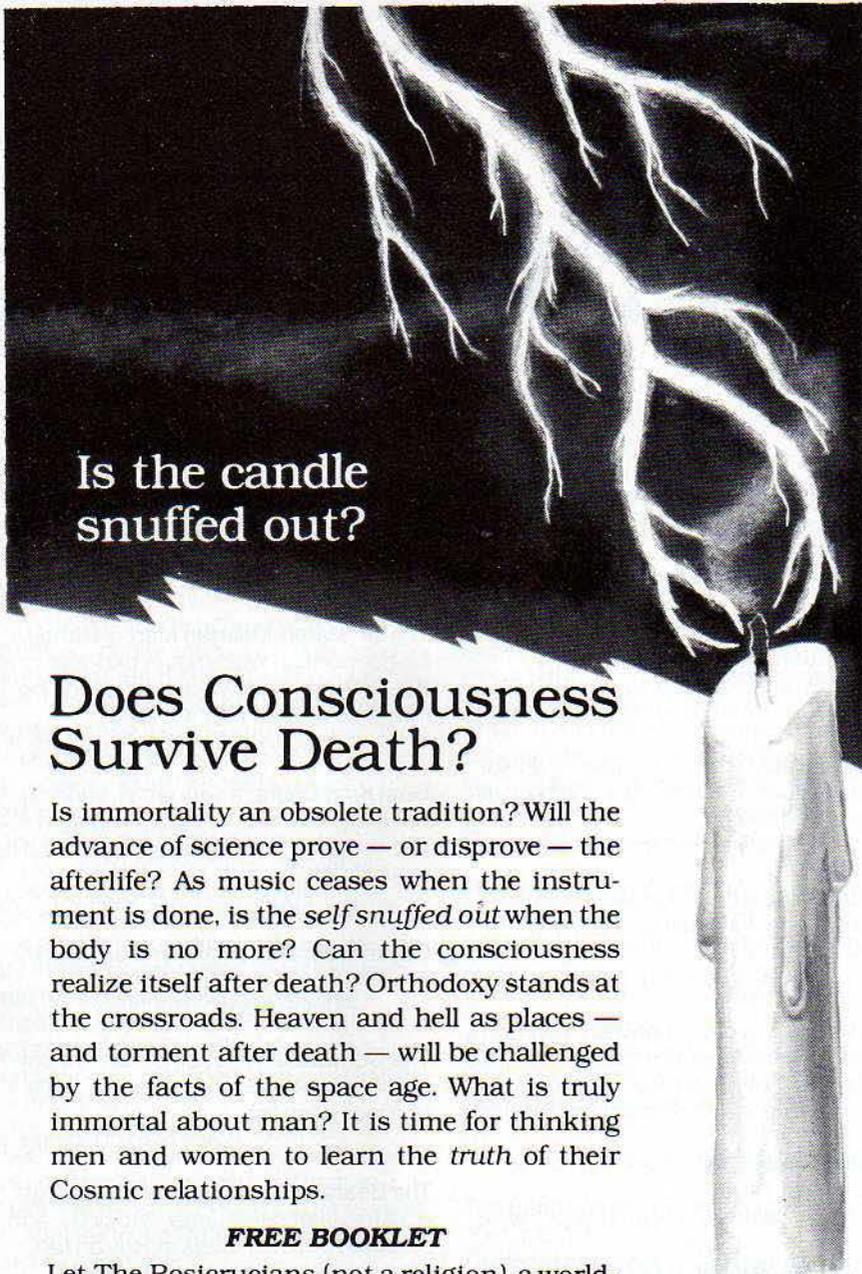
A few precautions might help to minimize the damage, other panelists suggested. "Let's require that independent witnesses be present," Hendry recommended. "When people who don't know each other report the same UFO in the same locale, we don't have to concern ourselves with the background or reliability of a single witness. The possibility of a hoax is reduced to an absolute minimum."

And Klass said, "Instead of encouraging the public to clog channels with cases that have prosaic explanations, we should say, 'Don't bother us unless you have the physical evidence, a photograph that is extraordinary, or an extraordinary experience.'"

Then he attempted to discredit Travis Walton, and war broke out. Walton, a lumberjack, claims to have been abducted by a UFO in the presence of several witnesses. But, according to Klass, Walton flunked a lie-detector test. Hendry, however, produced letters from two polygraph experts who had reviewed Walton's test. One charged that the interview technique was inadequate and 30 years out of date; the other said it



UFO panel at Smithsonian included (from left): Maccabee, Hynek, Oberg, Durant, and Hendry.



Is the candle  
snuffed out?

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looked perfectly valid. With that, Hendry dramatically tossed both letters over the lectern; point made — he implied.

Next came a UFO case from 1979, involving Minnesota Sheriff's Deputy Val Johnson (see UFO Update, October 1980). Johnson claims that he was injured and his patrol car was damaged in an encounter with a UFO, and Hendry's report on the case substantiates this.

Klass conceded two possible explanations: "Either an extraterrestrial craft flew by and the creatures reached out with a hammer and hit the headlight, hood, and windshield and bent two car antennas over, or Johnson did it himself, because he likes to play practical jokes."

To which Hendry replied, "Actually I'm inclined to agree with Mr. Klass. I think that Johnson is such a practical joker that he deliberately injured his eyes, as adjudged by two doctors, and entered a phony state of shock to impress the ambulance driver who removed him from the scene."

The onlookers fed the debate, and one question from the audience provoked an interesting exchange between moderator Durant and Maccabee. "Do any of you believe that the U.S. government or the Air Force has extraterrestrials from crashed spacecraft squirreled away in storage?" Durant asked provocatively. "Is there any evidence of this?"

"That's the question," Maccabee answered. "Is there evidence? If there were evidence one way or the other, we wouldn't have to reduce it to belief. I have no direct evidence, but I wouldn't be surprised."

"Would you like to believe it, Professor Maccabee?" Durant continued.

"I would not like it. As a matter of fact, I would rather believe that this whole UFO question had been solved many years ago. The fact that it wasn't solved many years ago is what attracted my interest. But I wish UFOs didn't exist."

The debate solved nothing, and no one who entered the day with a fixed opinion on the existence of UFOs changed his mind. But the symposium was significant for several reasons: Its sponsorship by the Smithsonian automatically made the subject more credible. And the interplay between the sides seemed to give each participant more respect for the opposition.

"The most important thing," concluded moderator Durant, "is that we're sitting down at one table. And that, I think, certainly augurs well. For the last thirty years we've never been able to get these participants together in one place. I hope this will be continued."

It was Klass who offered the final challenge: "It's time," he said, "for the leaders of the UFO movement, after a third of a century, to put up or shut up."

Clearly, both sides have their work cut out for them. ∞