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COSMIC CONSPIRACY: SIX DECADES OF GOVERNMENT UFO COVER-UPS —PART THREE—

The third in a six-part series on government suppression of UFO-related material, this article examines the 1960s.

The Sixties were marked by upheaval: street riots outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, "free love," and psychedelic drugs. And according to pundits, a "Big Brother" government intent on suppressing the winds of change had extended its reach beyond the merely social or political to the realm of UFOs. The result of this saucer suppression? Angry congressional hearings and the closure of Project Blue Book, the Air Force agency responsible for investigating UFOs.

The Sixties' "Saucer-gate" was triggered on March 20, 1966, when a glowing, football-shaped UFO was reported hovering above a swampy area near the women's dormitory of a small college in Hillsdale, Michigan. Witnesses included 87 female students and the local civil-defense director. The following night in Dexter, 63 miles away, another UFO was spotted by five people, including two police officers.

The Michigan sightings provoked a national outcry; in short, the public wanted an explanation. Addressing the largest media gathering in the history of the Detroit Free Press Club, Project Blue Book spokesman J. Allen Hynek, an astronomer

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with Ohio State University, finally ventured an opinion. He said the sightings might be due to "swamp gas"—methane gas from rotting vegetation that had somehow spontaneously ignited. The explanation didn't wash, and both Hynek and the Air Force found themselves the brunt of immediate and almost universal ridicule. Newspapers had a field day as cartoonists, columnists, and editorial writers nationwide lampooned the Air Force suggestion.

In a letter to the House Armed Services Committee, then-Michigan congressman and House Republican minority leader (and later president) Gerald R. Ford called for congressional hearings on the subject, arguing that "the American public deserves a better explanation than that thus far given by the Air Force." The subcommittee subsequently held its hearing on April 5, 1966, but only three individuals, all with Air Force connections, were invited to testify: Hynek; then-Blue Book chief Hector Quintanilla; and Harold D. Brown, secretary of the Air Force. Brown told the committee, chaired by L. Mendel Rivers, that they had no evidence of an extraterrestrial origin of UFOs, nor was there any indication that UFOs constituted a threat to national security.

Under scrutiny, however, the Air Force eventually agreed to an outside review of Blue Book's files. Toward that end, the Air Force awarded \$500,000 to the University of Colorado at Boulder. The major-domo of this extensive review was physicist Edward U. Condon, former director of the National Bureau of Standards. His second in command was the assistant dean of the graduate school, Robert Low.

Initially, critics of the government's UFO policy were happy to see the matter out of Air Force hands. But it didn't take long for their faith in the Condon effort to fade. If the Air Force had tried to gloss over the UFO issue, said retired Marine major Donald E. Keyhoe, director of the civilian National Investigation Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), the Condon Commission was even worse.

The day after his appointment, for instance, Condon was quoted in the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. He saw "no evidence," he said, for "advanced life on other planets." Moreover, he explained, the study would give the public a "better understanding of ordinary phenomena, which, if recognized at once, would reduce the number of UFO reports."

Low, Condon's chief administrator, seems to have prejudged the reality of UFOs, too. In a telling memo written to University administrators, Low noted that "the trick would be, I think, to describe the project so that to the public it would appear a totally objective study but to the scientific community would present the image of a group of nonbelievers trying their best to be objective but having an almost zero expectation of finding a saucer."

Condon soon fired the two senior staffers he blamed for leaking the memo to the press. Two weeks later, Mary Lou Armstrong, his own administrative assistant resigned, citing low morale within the project as a whole. "Low's attitude from the beginning," she wrote, "has been one of negativism. [He] showed little interest in keeping current on sightings, either by reading or talking with those who did." At one point, Low left for a month, ostensibly to represent the Condon Committee at the International Astronomical

least one genuine UFO was involved appeared to be fairly high."

Yet these suggestions that an unidentified phenomenon might indeed be afoot were buried in a bulky 1,500-page report. More readily accessible to the media was Condon's conclusion, published at the beginning of the study rather than at the end, as was standard scientific procedure. Essentially, Condon concluded, "further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby."

The Air Force seized the opportunity to withdraw from the minefield of UFOs, and on December 17, 1969, called a press conference to announce the closing of Project Blue Book. Citing the Condon report, acting secretary of the Air Force, Robert C. Seamans, Jr., told reporters that Blue Book's continuation could no longer "be justified on grounds of national security or in the interest of science."

Critics contend that Blue Book never mounted a thorough scientific investigation of the UFO phenomenon to begin with, and that during its 22-year involvement with the issue, it had functioned as little more than a public-relations program. The charge, it turns out, was made by Hynek himself. In his last interview, granted this reporter shortly before his death from a brain tumor, Hynek avowed that while the Air

Force always said it was interested in the study of UFOs, officials regularly "turned handsprings to keep a good case from getting to the attention of the media. Any case they solved," Hynek added, "they had no trouble talking about. It was really sad."

As the Sixties came to a close, the Air Force finally got what it wanted: It officially washed its hands of UFOs. Condon continued to deny the subject was "shrouded in secrecy." Overall, he said, the Air Force had done a commendable job.

Hynek agreed, though for reasons of his own. "The Air Force regarded UFOs as an intelligence matter, and it became increasingly more and more embarrassing to them," he said. "After all, we paid good tax dollars to have the Air Force guard our skies, and it would have been bad public relations for them to say, 'Yes, there's something up there, but we're helpless.' They just couldn't do that, so they took the very human action of protecting their own interests." ☐

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Union in Prague. Staff members suggested he use the opportunity to meet with veteran UFO researchers in England and France. Instead, Low went to Loch Ness, claiming that sea monsters and UFOs might share some similarities since neither existed. Even so, there is no record that he filed any written notes on his investigations.

The Condon Report was published in August of 1968 as the *Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects*. In all, 30 of the 91 cases analyzed remained unidentified. Examining the famous McMinnville, Oregon, UFO photos, for example, project investigators opined that this was "one of the few UFO reports in which all factors investigated, geometric, psychological, and physical, appear to be consistent with the assertion that an extraordinary flying object, silvery, metallic, disc shaped, flew within sight of two witnesses." Of a radar/visual UFO sighting that occurred over Lakenheath, England, in August of 1965, the study concluded that "the probability that at