



The REALL News



"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." -- James Randi

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A Plastic Phenomenon

by Martin Kottmeyer

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Even some individuals who do not take a nuts and bolts view of the UFO phenomenon have taken to thinking of UFOlogy as a basically static collection of beliefs and stories. This may partly be a consequence of the language adopted by UFOlogists. Nouns like objects and phenomenon promote a static image whereas the reality may actually be dynamic and, it is tempting to say, ephemeral. Though it is far too late to challenge such established conventions, there is an obvious corrective in simply reminding ourselves how UFOs have demonstrably changed over the past half century. The logical starting place is a visit to Ted Bloecher's monumental labor of love, *Report on the UFO Wave of 1947* (author, 1967). The portrait of the flying saucer phenomenon which emerges from the study of these 853 cases differs from later portraits in nearly every aspect.

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The shape of the objects in the 1947 wave stayed truer to the label of flying saucer than in any time since. 71% of the reported descriptions match the label unambiguously with words like circular, disc-like, pancake, plate, platter, and wheel. Another 11% use the term round which should be considered an obvious match but possesses the ambiguity of being consistent with spheres. The remaining 18% include a melange of 80 different terms, some of the more amazing being lobster-like, stove-pipe, butterfly, lima bean, umbrella, cocoon-like, clam, spool, and exclamation marks. By the Sixties, the percentage of reports involving the disc form had dropped to 26% according to both NICAP and John Keel.² In an analysis of reports between 1987 and 1990, Paul Ferrughelli found the category of discoid/circular/round shapes had dropped to just below 20%.³ This decrease seems due in large part to the expression "unidentified flying objects" being adopted by the Air Force and UFOlogists subsequent to 1947. The new term clearly has a wider meaning that allows distant points of light and an unrestricted range of forms to be considered relevant.

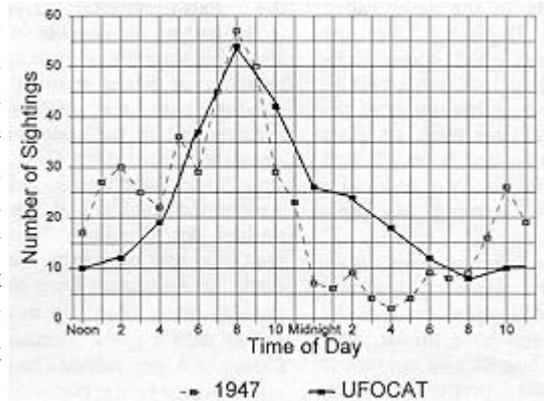
The reports of 1947 show a tendency for there to be more than one object per sighting and for those to be in formation. By Bloecher's count, 44% of the reports involved multiple objects. Statistics by Thomas Olsen in 1971 had the percentage down to 24%.⁴ By 1988, Ferrughelli found a mere 5.5%.⁵

High speed was a dominant characteristic of the saucers of 1947. 53% of the reports emphasized how fast they went. By 1971, Olsen found this in 41% of reports. By 1986, Ferrughelli found it only 22%. Inversely, the presence of hovering has gone from being a rarity -- 3% in 1947 -- to being the dominant flight characteristic of UFOs -- 49%.⁶ The reports of 1947 also display a wide range of acrobatic stunt maneuvers: loop the loops, roll maneuvers, banking, weaving, climbing, diving, tipping, tumbling, circling, swooping, and buzzing. Precise stats have not been done, but the sense that current reports are relatively more sedate and level-headed is unavoidable.

The reports of 1947 also bend, if not break, Jacques Vallee's "Law of Time" (which he represents as a chart showing when sightings have occurred). There are significantly more reports in the daytime between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. the time curve dips well below that of Vallee. While both curves peak in the early evening, the 1947 curve possesses a secondary peak at 3 p.m. The minima has shifted by four hours. (See chart showing comparison of 1947 sightings to Hendry's interpretation of Vallee's "Law.")



The departures from current norms point to the involvement of the Kenneth Arnold news story which ushered in the 1947 wave. The AP news story had him reporting nine bright saucer-like objects flying at the then incredible speed of 1,200 m.p.h. They waded in and out of formation. He saw them at 3 p.m. The seminal character of the Arnold report is reinforced by something he did not say. It is often overlooked that Arnold said nothing about the objects being extraterrestrial. The initial dispatch has him not making any guess at all at what he had seen. Shortly thereafter he gravitated to the notion it was a jet or rocket being tested by the U.S. government. Those who took Arnold seriously -- most didn't -- similarly believed it was either an American secret weapon or a Soviet device.



Comparison chart between 1947 Time Curve and chart of UFOCAT in Hendry's *UFO Handbook*. Note consistently higher proportion between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and lower proportion between 10 a.m. and 6 a.m.

A Gallup poll conducted shortly after the 1947 wave

tallied no believers in the idea that flying saucers were extraterrestrial.⁷ The idea of alien involvement appeared in some news articles but in predominantly comic tones. Ted Bloecher found only two flying saucer reports where the sighter explicitly indicated a belief that the saucers were alien. Sift through the reports of 1947 and there is a total absence of details pointing to the presence of extraterrestrial technology. There are no lasers, heat beams, paralysis rays or gasses, levitation of people or objects, dematerialization, matter interpenetration, robots, remote eyes, space-suited entities, or even a simple observation port with strange eyes peering out of it. Cars did not stall out as they would years later. UFOlogists have hopefully pointed to animal reaction reports as suggestive of early evidence of alien involvement, but a close reading indicates the objects were doing barn-storming maneuvers. The assumption of spooky forces isn't required.

Conversely, the details often pointed to contemporary aviation. Propellers were seen; one report having a propeller larger than the rest of the object. Jet pipes, pilot cockpits, glass domes, fins, legs, and antennae featured in some descriptions. Smoke, vapor trails, and rocket flames repeatedly trailed the saucers. The saucer shape itself was only a slight variation of a plane recently in the news called the Flying Flapjack. Like the saucers it had good speed characteristics. Though Bloecher had no entity accounts in his report of the 1947 wave, a later work on close encounters indicated a couple had finally been found. One involved a saucer pilot wearing a Navy uniform.⁸

The idea that saucers were secret weapons remained dominant in the public imagination into the early Fifties and hung on for years even as UFOlogists and contactees advanced the proposition that saucers carried interplanetary visitors. Reports continued with earthly detailing. The notorious Spitzbergen crash story included a detail that there were Russian symbols on the chronometers and instrumentation. Its rim was spun by 46 jets on its outer edge; an exotic arrangement, but very earthly.⁹ The case influenced the Oscar Linke saucer encounter, the earliest entity case embraced by the media. Besides pinwheeling jet flames, Linke said it was piloted by men in heavy polar garments, clearly suggestive of the climes of Russia.¹⁰ Saucers with pinwheeling jets were repeatedly seen from the Fifties into the Sixties.¹¹ Nowadays, nobody does.

Reports of encounters with human pilots occurred off and on for years with details consistent with earthly origins: Navy officers in white hats, aviator-style oxygen masks, white coveralls, a black scarf, a baseball cap, a German accent, guys who waved.¹² By the Eighties, human pilots consistent with the secret weapons idea ceased to be reported. When human figures are seen they are now regarded as in the employ of aliens or are regarded by UFOlogists as deceptions.¹³

While both the Gallup poll and Bloecher's study establishes that the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis (ETH) had no measurable support in 1947, this situation did not forbid the presence of fringe material arising playing with the idea of alien involvement in the saucer mystery. As early as four days after Arnold's story broke, some woman rushed into a room, took one look at Arnold, and dashed out shrieking, "There's the man who saw men from Mars!" Hal Boyle, an Associated Press columnist, spoofed going on a trip in a flying saucer with a green Martian named Balmy.¹⁴ A guy named Ole J. Sneide was reported by the *Washington Post* and others to be in contact with the Great Master who had left earth in disgust after the fall of the Roman empire. He warned they could clean the surface of the earth in less than 24 hours — a striking precursor to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and certain contactees of the Fifties.¹⁵ One zany got considerable press for his telepathic journey to an "astral plane" in outer space operating off the "dark side of the moon." He met the Dhyannis, rulers of creation, who indicated they were dropping Metaboblons into our atmosphere to counteract atomic radiation.¹⁶

Already the link of saucers to nuclear fears was forged. In Houston, Texas, there is an encounter by a merchant seaman with a diminutive pilot, two feet tall, with a head the size of a basketball. It greets him, re-enters his vehicle, and takes off.¹⁷ Though it is not explicit that this an alien, the form fits the pulp science fiction cliché enough to suspect the intent.¹⁸ There is also a letter to the July 9th *Nashville Tennessean* by a man claiming to have a brush with a couple of men described as "all heads and arms and legs, and glowing like fireflies." They exchanged greetings in sign language and took off in a cloud of dust. The description begs to be written off as the product of a backwoods talespinner.¹⁹

It would clearly be unfair to note the differences between these stories and present day abduction accounts. They are thin to the point of transparency and would be embraced by few. Yet they are interesting in how they display presumptions which would turn up in later, more seriously regarded material. The connection to nuclear fears, their command of great power which could destroy us, their being short and big-headed, and the gestures of friendliness, would recur in better accounts in the Fifties. The use of sign language incorporates the assumption that aliens are engaged in first contact. One finds this in other early accounts such as the July 23, 1947, encounter of Jose Higgins, the first version of the Adamski contact, and the Cedric Allingham tale.²⁰ As the years progress, gaps in their knowledge become less extreme, but the Hill case still shows the presumption of being newly arrived in such details as unfamiliarity with aging and their surprise over Barney Hill's dentures. In fairness, it is hard for a historian not to think the latter was more of a nod to George Koehler's notorious crashed saucer yarn about dead aliens having perfect teeth than to assumptions of arrival in 1947.²¹ Present accounts, even when back-dated, never convey the same sense of recent arrival.

The relative shortness of the majority of aliens seems a general constant of accounts outside of the contactee utopians from the Fifties to the present. Their look however varied too much for any other consistent generalizations. One curiosity, noted by Bloecher, is that none of the entities in American reports wore helmets suggestive of an air supply in the Fifties. In Europe, they were the norm.²² None appear here until the mid-Sixties, become numerous after the controversial Falkville policeman photos in 1973, but then almost vanish in recent years.²³

There were no fully realized Grays in the Fifties. Partial approximations can be said to exist, as in the Mr. X entity photo hoax; the 1954 French wave encounter tales of Marius Dewilde, M. Olivier, and Franz Hoge; and the December 1957 Salzburg abduction.²⁴ Such cases, however, are imperfect in the details. The Salzburg case, for example, speaks of bug-like compound eyes where we now only see large, tilted, all-black eyes. Not one abduction entity drawing prior to the Hopkins/Strieber era has this style of eye. Generally they were more human-like by having eyes with pupils surrounded by whites. None of the Fifties cases speak of thin, high necks, whereas this has been commonplace since Spielberg's art deco alien for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).²⁵ Also prominently absent from the Fifties are any fully realized space bugs. Praying mantis and grasshopper-style aliens as a type do not start until 1965, and they take until the Nineties to become numerous enough to merit attention from UFOlogists.²⁶

Saucer interiors have changed. The contactees of the Fifties reported saucers that were brightly lit and luxurious. Abductees report more subdued lighting and an interior more devoted to instrumentation and sparse efficient design.²⁷ Things associated with reconnaissance like Adamski's power telescope and magnetic drive pillar or baby saucers for distant spying, reported by Adamski, Menger, and Schirmer, are quietly being replaced by equipment for the Hybrid program.²⁸ Incubatoriums, never seen before Myra Hansen's abduction to an underground government facility in May 1980, are now seen frequently.²⁹

On a broadly abstract level, one of the few constants seen in the UFO phenomenon is a relationship to nuclear fears. The specifics of nuclear fears, however, have changed over the past five decades and have been definitively documented by Spencer Weart's history of the subject.³⁰ The UFO phenomenon has reflected these changes. In the Fifties, the fear was over The Bomb, its raw destructiveness and the potential to make life extinct through the effects of fallout. The contactees from Adamski, van Tassel, to the Mitchell sisters emphasized this threat to all mankind in their prophecies.³¹ It is arguable that Betty Hill's abduction nightmare was triggered by fears of nuclear contamination which arose when she tested certain odd pockmarks on her car with a compass and got what she thought was a positive reaction.³² The idea of saucers creating radioactive pockmarks incidentally existed already in the Mildred Wenzel story generated in the 1957 saucer wave.³³

Wargasm, the fear of accidental nuclear war, becomes dominant in the early Sixties and sees reflection in a warning by George Fawcett that UFOs could trigger it.³⁴ Fear of nuclear reactors arises to prominence in the Sixties and is quickly reflected in the Exeter flap where saucers are reported around and on the power lines leading from the first commercial reactor, Shippingport Atomic Electric.³⁵ This continues into the Seventies and is most wildly reflected in the abduction story, *The Janos People*, wherein a planet is ruined by the chaining of a network of nuclear reactors.³⁶ This engineering absurdity strongly suggests exposure to the movie, *Red Alert* (1977), whose plot also has the chaining of network of reactors, but on earth.³⁷

The Reagan era resurgence of nuclear war fears has an obvious mirror in abductee William Herrmann's jeremiad *Inevitable Destruction* (1981).³⁸ Increasing fears of nuclear waste see expression in Judy Doraty's 1980 revelations that aliens were testing mutes for radiation contamination,³⁹ the 1982 abduction of Donn Shallaross where aliens indicate we must learn how to dispose of used atomic waste and show him burial vaults for the purpose,⁴⁰ and George Andrews's advice to rocket nuclear waste into impending supernovae.⁴¹ A more recent alien vision by abductee Katharina Wilson in 1991 combines nuclear waste fear with a string of revelations of government cover-ups of early nuclear experimentation on humans. She sees an underground ocean killed by three ancient nuclear power plants and how people tried to cover it up -- literally and figuratively.⁴²

Some have noted that the ever-present world destruction fantasies of UFOlogy are moving away from nuclear themes to more ecological concerns. It is interesting to note that Charles Strozier has observed a parallel drift from nuclear to ecological themes in his study of recent Christian apocalyptic rhetoric.⁴³ Ronald Bailey has also documented an influx of nuclear activists into environmental doomsaying.⁴⁴ John Mack's shift from work in the prevention of nuclear war to an embrace of saucer apocalyptic and his becoming a prophet of the death of the earth serves as a high profile emblem of this particular cultural shift.⁴⁵

One could easily go on and on documenting subtler changes; things like the broadening range of magical powers aliens have displayed from gliding and mind control to size-shifting, passing through walls, and switching people off. One could show how the problems they cause, from vehicle interference to lustful thoughts, have similarly broadened in range. Bullard has noted several claims of change like a shift from a preference in abductions from cars to bedroom intrusions.⁴⁶ Rather than risk tedium, this seems as good a point as any to shut up and regard the proposition of an essentially static UFO phenomenon as refuted. Anyone holding the view that it is confoundingly unoriginal and incredibly repetitive beyond the expectations of the wealth of the

human imagination would do well to consider soap operas, cop shows, romances, and Japanese monster movies as deeper challenges to cultural theory.⁴⁷

Let no one pretend that the UFO phenomenon was cast in iron in 1947 and left to hang in the sky as a particularly enigmatic art piece for humanity to distantly appreciate. The UFO phenomenon has been a wholly plastic medium that is slowly reshaped by beliefs and fears of a culture that, over the past half century, has changed dramatically itself. Seeing these changes does nothing to restore earlier hopes and fears for The Landing; if anything it renders it as ever more distant. It should however restore the sensibility of the UFO phenomenon as a dynamic presence interacting with human thought.

Those who contemplated the flying saucer mystery in 1947 predicted the solution would come quickly or that it was a fad, a nine-day wonder that people would quickly tire of. There was no inkling it would develop into a fascination that would span over 50 years and fill long bookshelves. Despite the mass of experience and knowledge and study that time has brought us, the only prediction that seems safe to make is that the UFO phenomenon will endlessly surprise us all. Emphasis on endless. May the next century be so amazing!

[Martin Kottmeyer has written many articles for The REALL News in the past five years!]

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