

UFO CHRONICLE

by J. Antonio Huneus



Big Mack attack

"It is difficult for us to admit when we do not know something. In psychiatry there is a tendency, natural enough perhaps, to try to fit psychological data or emotional phenomena into familiar categories. Total uncertainty is very uncomfortable."—John E. Mack, M.D. in *Abduction—Human Encounters with Aliens*, 1994.

In its May 4, 1995, edition, *The New York Times* published a lengthy article by William Honan entitled "Harvard Investigates a Professor Who Wrote of Space Aliens." It disclosed that Daniel Toteson, the dean of Harvard Medical School, where John Mack is a professor of psychiatry, last year convened a committee to examine Mack's research into the controversial field of alien abductions. "The Harvard committee," reported Honan, "is headed by Dr. Arnold Relman, an emeritus professor of the medical school and former editor of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, and includes two lawyers from the Harvard counsel's office. The members held more than 30 closed hearings over the last 12 months, some with Dr. Mack."

Neither the medical school nor Mack made comments to the *Times*, but Honan found "three participants, who all spoke on condition of anonymity." The committee's draft report is apparently sharply critical of Mack's work and "deplored his scholarship methods." To insure that the story didn't go unnoticed, the *Times* published a second, shorter article by Honan in its May 7 "Sunday Week in Review" section, entitled "Should Harvard Beam Him Up?" Other articles appeared in the *Boston Herald* and *The Harvard Crimson*, which is Har-

vard University's on-campus newspaper.

There was silence again from both the medical school and Mack's Program for Extraordinary Experience Research (PEER). This is the abduction project at the Center for Psychology and Social Change, founded by Mack in 1983 at Harvard's Cambridge Hospital. Yet the



Dr. John Mack

Photo: A. Huneus

Crimson located a reliable source who requested anonymity. "By agreement of all parties concerned, it was supposed to be confidential," said the source, adding that "the committee is still going on and no final conclusions have been reached." While the issues of academic freedom and tenure have been raised by several observers, the source told the *Crimson* that "the committee was convened by Dean Toteson as an ad hoc fact-finding committee, not as part of a disciplinary or misconduct committee."

Weeks earlier I had received an eight-page letter by California attorney Daniel P. Sheehan. It was addressed to all the consultants to the Mutual UFO Network in an effort to elicit support for Mack, who is a member of MUFON's board of directors. Sheehan charged that "the secret procedures adopted by the committee violate every known principle of academic freedom." He proceeded to quote excerpts from the secret draft report that he had somehow secured. The quotes show a high level of skepticism toward UFOs, abductions, and Mack's research.

The committee acknowledged that there is "a long history of sightings of unidentifiable objects in the sky," but then adds that "when carefully investigated, such sightings have been proven to be erroneous, fraudulent, or due to known natural or man-made phenomena." The draft report finds that "the same criticism can be made of the claims of 'missing time.' Although Dr. Mack mentions this phenomenon several times in his book and in the tapes [of interviews with his abductee clients turned over to the committee], there is no independent documentation for such claims."

The list of excerpts goes on. "The Harvard Faculty Committee, at pages 13 & 14 of its Draft Report," writes Sheehan. "Finds that it is professionally irresponsible for any academic, scholar, or practicing psychiatrist to give any credence whatsoever to any personal report of a direct personal contact between a human being and an extraterrestrial being until after the person making such a report has been subjected to every possible available battery of standard psychological tests which might conceivably

explain the report as the product of some known form of clinical psychosis." According to Sheehan, the report lists possible clinical explanations for abductions, like "complex partial seizures, hypnagogic phenomena such as lucid dreaming or other states between REM [Rapid Eye Movement—ed.] sleep and waking—or some other psychologically-based explanation."

Psychological explanations

It's easy for Harvard to toss around a few psychological explanations that sound semi-convincing, but doing the clinical work and proving it is another matter. Mack declined to talk to us because of the delicate nature of the Harvard inquiry. Yet there is a good response at the end of his 1994 book, *Abductions: Human Encounters with Aliens*, just released in paperback by Ballantine. "I cannot discourage those who try to discover conventional explanations for the abduction phenomenon," wrote Mack. "I would only point out that as a clinician, I have spent countless hours trying to find alternate explanations that would not require the major shift in my worldview that I have had to face...no familiar theory or explanation has come even close to accounting for the basic features of the abduction phenomenon. In short, it is what it is, though the ultimate source of these experiences remains a mystery."

It's almost certain that the Sheehan letter was the leak that revealed the existence of the Harvard committee. It must be said, however, that Daniel Sheehan is a controversial lawyer. In the late '80s he was involved in a conspiracy case against the government involving something called the Christic Institute and allegations of drug smuggling during the Iran-Contra scandal, a case that he lost. Although we don't know the details of his association with Mack, it appears he was never formally retained by the doctor, but rather volunteered to assist him. About the only thing that Mack's office would comment on is that "Mr. Sheehan doesn't repre-

sent Dr. Mack." We were instead given the phone number of Boston attorney Roderick MacLeish, Jr., who is currently Mack's sole lawyer in this affair. MacLeish's secretary told us that "He is giving no comments, at Dr. Mack's request." The *Harvard Crimson*, on the other hand, reported that MacLeish stated that "Sheehan was not authorized to send out the letter."

Attempts to elicit some answers from Harvard Medical School didn't fare much better. We contacted the School's Press Office and reached spokeswoman Karen McGinity, who read from a prepared statement: "It is the policy of Harvard University to neither confirm nor deny information relating to personnel matters, including those regarding members of the fac-

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ulty. This is for the protection of the individual faculty member as well as the faculty as a whole." She would not say anything else. As for Mack, the only comments he has made since news of this affair broke out were posted by the Reuter news agency on computer bulletin boards in late May. Mack was interviewed briefly on a conference call. Asked whether he was paying a price for his abduction work; Mack responded, "Absolutely," in terms of "energy, time, money, attack, and criticism. On the other hand, it's been worth it because I think it's contributed to opening people's minds to some shift in consciousness."

"The psychological approaches to this have been proven pretty solidly bankrupt for about 25 years," Mack said later in the Reuter interview. He also conceded that it was almost impossible to satisfy skeptics, no matter how good the evidence was. As an example, he mentioned the Gulf Breeze UFO photographs taken by Ed Walters, which have divided the ufological community for years. But despite it all, Mack concluded, "There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions of these individu-

als [abductees] in this country alone, so from the point of helping people, I think it's been worthwhile."

Change of heart

When news of Mack's involvement with abductions emerged in 1992, he had a warm reception in the media. Sympathetic profiles appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Harvard Magazine*, and *The Boston Globe Magazine*. It was from these and other publications that Mack was contacted by many clients, some of whom appeared in the 13 case histories published in his book *Abduction*. Mack's prestige as a maverick Harvard psychiatrist and 1977 Pulitzer Prize winner for his biography of Lawrence of Arabia contributed to his mass appeal. Yet by the time his book was published in 1994, Mack was being criticized by the media. The harshest blow came from *Time* on April 25, 1994. An article reported that a self-described writer named Donna Bassett had infiltrated Mack's abductee support group and conned him with the story of her abduction during the Cuban missile crisis. Fortunately for Mack, Bassett's case was not included in his book. On the Char-

lic Rose TV talk show, Mack said that the experiencers in his group who knew Bassett believed that "she actually is an abductee who had these experiences" and who is in deep denial.

It's hard to tell where the story will end. Will Harvard give Mack a reprimand, or will they begin procedures to remove his tenure? If the university pursues the harshest path, it could well backfire. Harvard would be accused of launching an inquisition, and sales of Mack's book would probably soar with the controversy. Many (including myself) support Mack's right to pursue his research without interference.

Perhaps something positive may come out of all this. If more doctors and scientists begin to take a serious and unbiased look at the abduction phenomenon, they'll discover that purely psychological explanations are not enough. They can start by looking at the recently published, 684-page *Alien Discussions: Proceedings of the Abduction Study Conference Held at M.I.T.*, which was organized in 1992 by Mack and physicist David Pritchard. More about this book and another on the same conference by C. D. B. Bryan in a future column. ■

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