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CRITIQUE OF "DARK EAGLES"

From: Bill Sweetman
To: Fellow Seekers of the Truth
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Dark Eagles, a book purportedly written by "historian" Curtis Peebles, is billed as "a history of top-secret US aircraft programs". In fact, it deals with a few such programs: the first US jet, the Bell XP-59; the Lockheed U-2; the A-12/SR-71/D-21 family; the Teledyne Ryan reconnaissance drones; the Have Blue/F-117; and, to some extent, the testing of MiG-21s and MiG-23s. Those familiar with the literature will find very little here that is new. Miller, Wagner and Sloan, Crickmore, Giangreco, Goodall and myself have covered these areas and are heavily cited in Peebles' references - in fact, the Wagner/Sloan books on the Teledyne Ryan drones are almost the only references in those chapters. It is a wonder that Peebles does not list his scanner as a co-author. Peebles oversteps the limits of his talents, however, when he can no longer crib from a single authoritative source. This happens when he turns his attention to black projects which have not yet been acknowledged.

Peebles states, as fact, that all reports of high-speed classified aircraft are myths, springing from the same sources as UFO stories. "Aurora Does Not Exist, Elvis is Dead - Accept It" is a sample sub-heading.

The trouble is, Peebles commits practically every logical error in the book in his floundering attempts to support such a conclusion.

To begin with, the "Aurora myth" is Peebles' own invention. By re-telling every high-speed aircraft report published between the mid-1970s and the present day, he tries to give the impression that these stories are all, in some way, linked to a common source. Peebles also invents a corps of "believers" in Aurora, a term which he uses repeatedly. But there are no believers, no faith, no doctrine and no One True Church, just a bunch of individuals who keep investigating and asking questions. As in any open investigation, the answers which crop up are sometimes conflicting. But Peebles assumes that any difference between any two reports invalidates them all. According to this logic: "Mr. Smith says sheep are white; Mr. Jones says sheep are green; therefore sheep do not exist." "Argumentum ad hominem" was a known fallacy long before it was translated from Greek into Latin, but that idea never found its way into Peebles' education. UFO sources Bob Lazar and John Lear have both talked about Aurora, says Peebles. He does not even quote what Lear says about Aurora: in fact, Lear was one of the first outsiders to find his way to the gates of Groom Lake, and took a photograph of the base. But since they are UFO believers, he says, the Aurora story must be false. "Mr. Jones says sheep are white. Mr. Jones cheats on his wife. Therefore, there are no sheep."

What Peebles is trying to do is to build a case that Aurora and UFO reports are essentially the same. In the process, he topples into absurdity. Quote: "On October 16, 1992, the Fox program Sightings had a segment on Aurora - it had been preceded by a report on UFO abductions." What does that prove, except that Sightings has a wide-ranging taste for mysteries? Nothing at all, is the answer.

Of course, Peebles' own sources are pure gold, as typified by the "private source" cited in the footnotes, who told Peebles that "the whole Aurora story has been pushed by a tight circle of Black airplane buffs, aerospace writers, and believers in various far-out UFO conspiracy theories". This statement is in itself a conspiracy theory, implying that some secret cabal dictates the content of both Popular Science and Aviation Week. Logic again: "Bill Clinton belongs to the Trilateral Commission. So does George Bush. Therefore, the Trilateral Commission controls the USA."

We should also look at Peebles' source. Some of the comments that Peebles attributes to this "private source" are almost word-for-word echoes of from an anonymous letter received by Popular Science after the publication of my March 1993 Aurora story. I heard almost identical comments from Phil Klass, AvWeek contributing editor and UFO debunker, in a face-to-face meeting in October 1993. I don't think Phil Klass is an anonymous letter writer (heck, he's made so many enemies that one or two more wouldn't matter) but it seems that he is probably Peebles' "private source".

Now, let's examine the identity of the gutless weasel who sent that letter to PopSci. Strangely enough, both the gutless weasel and Peebles explain away the August 1992 "XB-70" reports in exactly the same way: mis-identification of an F-14, based on personal experience.

When you can't attack evidence ad hominem, there are always other creative ways around it. Peebles' view of the North Sea sighting - in which an aircraft with a pure isosceles shape was seen apparently refueling from a KC-135, escorted by two F-111s - was that the aircraft was "in all probability.... simply a third F-111 with its wings swept back".

It's such a simple explanation that it hardly occurs to you to wonder why Peebles, who did not see the aircraft and has just admitted that he nearly mistook an F-14 at close quarters for a B-70-sized aircraft, thinks he knows better than the trained and experienced witness.

This points up the difference between a skeptic, who questions everything, and a debunker, who starts from the a priori position that some things exist and others don't. In the mind of a debunker, any evidence can be invalidated simply by inventing an alternative hypothesis to explain it, whether the hypothesis is tested or not. Did Peebles bother to pick up the phone and talk to the original witness? Of course not.

Ignoring evidence works, too. Anyone who opens this book hoping to find any discussion of the expanded black budgets of the 1980s, and what they might have purchased, will be disappointed. Peebles makes no reference to the abundant evidence of burgeoning spending, he does not reference Tim Weiner's Pulitzer-winning investigations in this area, and he buries deep inside a chapter the simple and very significant fact that Groom Lake was massively expanded and modernized long after the last major program that he talks about (the F-117) had moved on.

As for analyzing evidence, one really wonders whether Peebles should attempt it. Take this, from his footnotes: "The claim that a sonic boom cannot be heard at long range is incorrect. On several occasions in 1985 the author heard the double sonic boom of the space shuttle over Edwards AFB from Long Beach, California." There are two errors in this short statement. First, no investigator has said that some booms can't be heard at long range - just that the notorious California mystery booms weren't that kind of boom. Second, the shuttle never boomed over Edwards; Peebles heard it because it was flying over his head, so his evidence says nothing about boom footprints.

Peebles is at his most offensive, windy and pompous when he talks about "historical research" versus the "Aurora myth". "In historical research," he intones, "the separate bits of

information are assembled into a complete picture. It is much like the pieces of a puzzle."

Well, pardon the hell outta me, Curtis, but that is exactly what reporters and investigators were doing with the F-117 and SR-71 long before you arrived on the scene. And believe me, it was not tidy. There were just as many shadows and uncertainties to Stealth as there are to the high-speed reports. But we sorted it out as best we could, and that's why half the material in your own F-117, A-12 and D-21 chapters has been borrowed from the people that you dismiss as fantasists.

I think Johnson said it best: "Your work is both good and original. Unfortunately, those parts that are original are not good; and those parts that are good are not original."

Or to put it another way: If minds, like parachutes, work only when they are open, Curtis has just made a squishy mess on the airfield.

ENDS

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