

UFOs in Perspective

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Twenty years ago, in the spring of 1964, the nation's largest and most respected UFO organization -- known as NICAP-- published a 184-page report entitled "The UFO Evidence." It contained 746 UFO reports which NICAP believed to be the most impressive ones that had emerged since UFOs were "discovered" 17 years before.

NICAP admitted that "a large percentage of reported UFOs can be explained in terms of conventional objects and events." But NICAP insisted that "the residual unexplained cases constitute a separate and important problem..." NICAP noted that "a large number of the reports come from reputable and competent observers, honest and intelligent citizens."

Today, 20 years later, this 1964 NICAP statement remains the cornerstone of belief of those who preach the UFO gospel -- that UFOs that turn out to be Identified Flying Objects--or IFOs--represent a "separate problem" from those that remain unexplained, at least in the eyes of those who preach the UFO gospel. These unexplained reports, or "genuine UFOs," are claimed to involve some remarkable new phenomenon, unknown to the world of science.

In 1964, after examining the many unexplained UFO reports collected during the first 17 years of the UFO era, NICAP concluded that "UFOs are under intelligent control, making plausible the notion that some of them might be of extraterrestrial origin." (Emphasis added.) This statement was much more cautious than the real view held by NICAP's leaders, because the 184-page report was designed to generate Congressional interest and, hopefully, a Congressional investigation.

It is interesting today to note that this NICAP report made only brief mention of persons who then claimed to have gone aboard a flying saucer. NICAP said "our investigations have found NO evidence to support these claims, but considerable evidence of fraud." (Emphasis added)

* Author: "UFOs: The Public Deceived," Prometheus Books, Buffalo (1983)

Within 10 years a remarkable change occurred. Those who preach the UFO gospel would throw all caution to the winds and would rush to endorse the claims of persons reporting they had been abducted and taken aboard a flying saucer for a superficial physical examination.

For example, on the night of Oct. 11, 1973, two men in Pascagoula, Miss., claimed they were abducted while fishing and had been taken aboard a flying saucer for a physical examination. Dr. J. Allen Hynek visited Pascagoula for an on-site investigation and at a subsequent press conference, Hynek reported: "There is no question in my mind that these two men have had a very terrifying experience."

Two years later, in early November of 1975, a young wood-cutter in Arizona named Travis Walton claimed he too had been abducted, taken aboard a flying saucer and held captive there for nearly five days. The abduction tale was endorsed by a number of leaders of the UFO Movement, including Dr. Hynek, who was quoted as saying he was confident that Travis Walton was "not hoaxing."

Several years later, a book entitled "The Andreasson Affair" was published, describing the alleged experience of a young woman who claimed to have been abducted from her home by strange-looking creatures and taken aboard a flying saucer. Dr. Hynek wrote the introduction to this book, saying: "In the past, I frankly would not have touched an invitation to write the foreword for a book treating 'contactees,' abduction, mental telepathy, mystical contact and examination by 'aliens.' But across the years I have learned to broaden my view of the entire UFO phenomenon. Those who still hold that the entire subject of UFOs is nonsense will be sorely challenged if they have the courage to take an honest look at the present book.

Several years later, a woman named Barbara Schutte, then a field investigator for Hynek's Center for UFO Studies, claimed that she herself had been taken aboard a flying saucer at least four times, and possibly as many as eight times.

If the UFO evidence available in 1964 strongly supported the idea of some UFOs being extraterrestrial craft, then the mushrooming numbers of reports of UFO abductions in subsequent years clearly offered additional support for the E-T hypothesis. If only ONE of these ^{such} several hundred abduction tales is true, then clearly some UFOs are E-T craft. And since leaders of the UFO Movement have endorsed a number of these abduction tales and have rejected more prosaic explanations offered by skeptics, one would logically expect that the E-T hypothesis today would be universally accepted by those who preach the UFO gospel.

Yet that is not the case. For example, at the 1983 UFO conference in Pasadena, sponsored by the nation's largest UFO group--MUFON--Hynek presented a paper entitled "The Case Against E.T." Although Hynek did not rule out the E-T hypothesis completely, his paper offered seven reasons why it seemed poorly suited to explain many UFO reports. But Hynek's paper did not mention any of the many reports of UFO abductions, some of which he himself had earlier endorsed.

It is not really surprising that some of those who preach the UFO gospel should now begin to have serious doubts about the E-T hypothesis and should reach out for even more exotic explanations, such as science fiction's "intersecting universes," or turn to so-called "psychic phenomena."

Twenty years ago, those eager to believe the E-T hypothesis could logically expect that an E-T craft might soon land after at least two decades of reconnoitering Earth, or that one might soon crash -- assuming that Murphy's Law applies universally. Or that at least we might find some exotic sensors left behind by E-T visitors to measure and transmit back scientific data -- much as our own Apollo astronauts left behind sensors on the surface of the Moon.

Yet today, nearly 40 years since the birth of the UFO Era, there is not a single, incontrovertible physical artifact to support the E-T hypothesis Despite

the tens of billions of photographs taken by amateur and professional photographers, who have managed to photograph such brief, unexpected events as meteor-fireballs and a crippled 727 airliner plunging to earth near San Diego, there is not a single, incontestible photo showing an unusual craft-like object.

If those who preach the UFO gospel were truly open-minded, as they so often claim, they should by this time have abandoned the E-T hypothesis for a more tenable one. Yet the great majority are unwilling to do so and so the hypothesis of extra-terrestrial visitors remain the dominant one in the UFO Movement.

In December, 1967, in an article published in Playboy magazine, Dr. Hynek urged the creation of "a central UFO center in the United States" with a free 800-long-distance phone number, which "could be manned 24 hours a day by competent interrogators." Teams of UFO investigators then could be dispatched quickly to regions of UFO activity.

Hynek wrote that "If UFOs...actually exist, we would have photographs, movies, spectrograms, plaster casts of indentations (if a landing occurs) and detailed measurements and quantitative estimates of brightnesses, speeds, and so on within a year of the initiation of such a no-nonsense program." Hynek added that if such a "program is sincerely and intensively carried out for a full year and yields nothing, this in itself would be of great negative significance. I will be surprised if an intensive, year-long study yields nothing." (Emphasis added.)

It now has been more than 10 years since Hynek created the Center for UFO Studies, with a toll-free long-distance telephone number which was made available to law enforcement agencies around the country. Initially, Hynek's center had sufficient funds to hire a full-time UFO investigator, a very hard-working and talented young man named Allan Hendry. Although CUFOS could not afford to dispatch investigators to the site of every UFO report, it was able to use field investigators affiliated with MUFON, located throughout the nation.

Today, more than 10 years after Hynek created CUFOS, it has been unable to come up with any of the physical evidence to support the existence of a mysterious UFO phenomenon that Hynek so confidently predicted would be obtained after only one year.

But CUFOS has made a very significant contribution to our understanding of UFOs in the form of a book entitled "The UFO Handbook," authored by Allan Hendry, based on his investigation of more than 1,300 UFO reports submitted to CUFOS which he personally investigated during a 15-month period. As a result, Hendry became the world's most experienced UFO investigator, at least in terms of numbers of case.

Hendry's findings are especially significant, ^{because} When he joined CUFOS, he was a "UFO-enthusiast," if not a "believer." As Hendry wrote in the closing pages of his book: "Personally, I want there to be anomalous UFOs that defy the laws of physics for the simple reason that it would usher in a new scientific revolution."

But in his book Hendry admitted that he was able to find prosaic explanations for more than 91% of the 1,307 UFO cases he investigated. That is, ~~that~~ more than 91% of the UFOs proved to be IFOs. This is a remarkably high figure when we consider that Hendry was able to spend, on average, only a couple hours on each case because of the sheer number of cases reported to CUFOS. I know from first-hand experience that some tough cases may required hundreds of hours of effort to find a prosaic explanation.

Furthermore, Hendry admitted that most of the remaining UFO reports he was not able to explain MIGHT have prosaic explanations. Only 1.3% of all the reportsx could be characterized as "strong reports," which ^{seemed to have} -- to use Hendry's words -- "only a minimal chance of a prosaic explanation." But even these did not rule out completely the possibility of a prosaic explanation.

With remarkable ^{candor,} ~~conviction~~, in the closing chapter of Hendry's book, he wrote: "After examining 1,300 UFO reports first-hand...I still can not confidently draw a distinction between a 'real' physical phenomenon and a complex misperception, [between] a 'real' physical Close Encounter of the Third Kind and a sophisticated fantasy, a 'real' physical-trace case and a false-match of IFO and unrelated artifact." Hendry asked: "How can I be sure if my remaining 'UFOs' aren't simply IFOs misperceived (sincerely) to the point of fantasy."

During Hendry's investigations for CUFOS he had discovered ^{,for example,} that more than one of every four UFOs reported to the center turned out to be a bright celestial body. He discovered that "honest and intelligent" citizens could report that the UFO executed figure-8 movements, wiggled from side-to-side, or darted up and down when the object they were watching proved to be Mars, Venus or a bright star.

In the introduction to Hendry's book, Dr. Hynek wrote: "Although I recognize the importance of finding out just to what extent misidentification, wishful thinking, emotions and hallucinations enter into the UFO problem, I regretfully failed to make such a study. (Emphasis added.) This was a remarkably candid admission for a person who then had spent some 30 years in investigating UFO reports.

Hynek went on to say: "Allan Hendry is the first to attempt such an important evaluation...he has arrived at some very striking and unexpected results, and has exploded or thrown into serious question some of the 'instinctive' conclusions of even very experienced UFO investigators, myself included." (Emphasis added.)

What Hynek characterized as "very striking and unexpected results" had long been known to psychologists, to trial lawyers, to criminal investigators and to skeptical UFO investigators. It is the principle that eyewitness testimony and recollections can be very grossly in error. Or, as Hendry warned: "We cannot blindly accept UFO witnesses as error-free instruments."

It now has been more than five years since Hendry, the nation's most experienced UFO investigator published and documented his warning against assuming that UFO eyewitness reports are 100% accurate, and since Hynek endorsed his findings. Has this caveat been put to work in subsequent UFO investigations by CUFOS and others?

For several nights in March, 1983, and again in April, many observers in the region north of New York City reported seeing a giant, boomerang-shaped UFO. Many of the eyewitnesses were interviewed by a team of CUFOS investigators, headed by Philip Imbrogno. A case report on this investigation was published by CUFOS in the July/August 1983 issue of International UFO Reporter.

CUFOS and Imbrogno reported that 90% of the observers said the object was boomerang or V-shaped. Eighty percent (80%) reported that the giant UFO sometimes hovered in one spot, 40% said it made right-angle turns and sudden stops, and 30% said it made no noise or sound. Two observers reported that the giant UFO had hovered over their backyard at an altitude of "less than 60 feet."

When Hynek offered an editorial opinion in his publication, he said the case "cries out for a natural explanation," but ^{he} added that "97% of the witnesses stated that the many lights with which the boomerang-shaped object was festooned did not change their relative distances." This, Hynek said, "rules out any formation-flying by small planes cruising about for a quarter-hour, making right-angle turns, hovering for as much as two minutes, flying dangerously close to the ground and far below stall-speed." Hynek was ignoring Hendry's sage warning that "we cannot blindly accept UFO witnesses as error-free instruments."

The next issue of the CUFOS publication provided a follow-up report by its investigators. Imbrogno had learned that the giant UFO might be dare-devil private pilots flying in close formation to generate UFO reports. So one night he staked out a small airport near Stormville, New York and, to use his words, "verified that some of the [UFO] reports were the result of these planes flying in formation."

Imbrogno and his fellow CUFOS investigators concluded -- to use their words-- "that part of the mystery was solved, but this formation flying can not explain the bulk of the March reports..." (Emphasis added.) For example, Imbrogno cited a report by two women who described the giant UFO as "hovering... no more than 50 ft. in the air," which they said "glided silently towards them." In the same issue, Hynek also acknowledged that "part of the mystery has been solved," but he added that "there is as yet no explanation for the slow-moving, silent and at times hovering boomerang UFO."

The next CUFOS report on the boomerang-shaped UFO appeared in the March/April 1984 issue of International UFO Reporter, in which Hynek reported that he himself had spent "two weekends in the area for an on-site, face-to-face interviews with key witnesses, plus many hours on the phone." Hynek said: "We all remain mystified." Hynek said that the dare-devil pilots flying in close formation explanation was the "only seemingly tenable" one, but he concluded it was "completely untenable," based on reports obtained by CUFOS investigators. For example, Imbrogno and his associates reported an account by three witnesses who said the giant UFO had "hovered above their heads for 10 minutes." Imbrogno admitted that law enforcement agencies in the area believed the boomerang UFO was nothing more than private planes flying in close formation, but he added: "This theory ^{has} never ~~been~~ confirmed and we can now demonstrate that it is next to impossible..."

Quite a different conclusion was reached early this year by a young reporter for the Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Journal, named William LaRue, who himself had seen the giant UFO fly over Poughkeepsie. After a brief investigation, LaRue was able to locate and interview one of the dare-devil pilots after he agreed not to include his name in the newspaper articles he subsequently wrote. This contrasts with the year-long investigative efforts by the CUFOS team who seemingly were unable to locate any of the dare-devil pilots.

This past summer, the giant UFO returned to its favorite haunt north of New York City and was seen by hundreds of persons, as reported in the pages of the good, gray New York Times, as well as on local New York radio and TV news. This prompted Leon Jaroff, managing editor of Discover magazine, to assign reporter Glen Garelik to investigate the case.

In talking with NY State Police, Garelik learned that they often got advanced warning that the giant UFO would be aloft, to prepare them for the avalanche of telephone calls that would result. Because the formation flight was not in violation of the law, they took no action against the hoaxers. In a few weeks Discover magazine had solved the mystery to its satisfaction and published its findings in its November issue. Included was a photograph that Garelik obtained which clearly shows a number of small aircraft flying in formation, not a giant craft as so often had been reported. At the snack-bar of the Stormville, N.Y. airport, which the CUFOS investigators had visited, Garelik photographed a sign advertising "UFO-BURGERS" which, reportedly contained "a number of unidentified flying ingredients."

But Hynek remains unconvinced. As he commented in the most recent issue of the CUFOS publication: "The full story has not yet been told. It is a continuing drama. But if it should prove to have a natural explanation, we can be sure it will be spectacular." Hynek continued: "Unless we impugn the sanity of the many independent witnesses, (air)planes, blimps, atmospheric or astronomical phenomena and hallucinations have been ruled out." (Emphasis added.)

This raises a crucial question. Has the giant boomerang-UFO case been solved? Or must it be catalogued as "unexplained" until every single witness is willing to admit that perhaps he, or she, erred in some details in the excitement of the moment, possibly unwittingly brainwashed by what he, or she, had read or heard about the exciting UFO.

Must a UFO case be catalogued as "unexplained" until every pro-UFO investigator who has publicly characterized it as being an outstanding case admits that he, or she, did not conduct a sufficiently rigorous investigation, and failed to heed the sage advice of Allan Hendry not to accept eyewitness testimony as being 100% accurate?

By the same token, should those of us who come up with a prosaic explanation that seems to us to explain a UFO case be the final arbiter? After all, we too could be said to have a vested interest.

More than a century ago, Congress was facing the claims of persons who said they had invented a "perpetual motion machine," and who wanted government funds for its further development. Congress, wisely recognizing that its members lacked the expertise to evaluate such claims, called for the creation of our National Academy of Sciences to make such an evaluation, drawing on the expertise of the nation's leading scientists. The National Academy has continued to perform this function through the years by convening special panels of top scientists to investigate controversial issues and to render a judgement.

After nearly four decades of controversy about UFOs, the time has come to make use of NAS's good services. I propose that Dr. J. Allen Hynek, as the head of the nation's most prestigious UFO organization, request the National Academy of Sciences to form a panel to render judgement on the UFO question. Specifically, whether there is, or is not, some mysterious phenomenon at the root of the UFO issue that does defy explanation -- a phenomenon that Hynek predicts could lead to a "revolution in scientific thinking which will be more far-reaching than the scientific revolutions of the past, greater even than the Copernican revolution."*

Further, that Hynek offer to submit to this NAS panel a report on one, two or even three UFO cases which have been rigorously investigated and which he is certain can not possibly be explained in prosaic terms. The only constraint on the choice of cases is that they involve incidents which occurred in the United States

to facilitate investigation by members of the NAS panel. Naturally the panel would be free to consult with all interested parties, including UFO skeptics.

If this NAS panel should then conclude that even ONE of the several UFO cases submitted can not possibly be explained in prosaic terms, UFOs instantly would achieve recognition as a legitimate scientific mystery -- deserving of attention by the world of science and funding by the U.S. government.

It is clear that it is time for the leaders of the UFO Movement to take a new tack, that simply collecting more and more UFO reports leads no-where. Hynek ~~acknowledged~~ acknowledged this more than five years ago when he wrote the introduction to Allan Hendry's book. Hynek said: "Unless we alter our methodology and use to the full extent what we learn from close attention to the manner in which IFOs are allowed to masquerade as UFOs because of the desire of the untutored and the wishful thinkers to transform IFOs into UFOs, we shall make little progress.... we shall have another quarter century of misinformation and misguidance." (Emphasis added.)

The time has come for a bold new approach and I invite a favorable response from Dr. Hynek and CUFOS -- if not today, then soon.