

BRIEFING

What the U.S. Really Found Out About Those UFOs

By Patrick Huyghe

Despite official pronouncements for decades that UFOs were nothing more than misidentified aerial objects and as such were no cause for alarm, recently declassified UFO records from the CIA, the FBI and other federal agencies indicate that ever since UFOs made their appearance in our skies in the 1940s, the phenomenon has aroused much serious behind-the-scenes concern in official circles.

Details of the intelligence community's protracted obsession with the subject of UFOs has emerged over the past few years with the release of long-withheld government records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. Though these papers fail to resolve the UFO enigma, they do manage to dispel many popular notions about the UFO controversy, as well as give substance to a number of others.

Official records now available appear to put to rest doubts that the government knew more about UFOs than it claimed over the past 32 years. From the start, it has been convinced that most UFO sightings could be explained in terms of misidentified balloons, cloud formations, airplanes, ball lightning, meteors and other natural phenomena.

But the papers also show that the government remains perplexed about the nagging residue of unexplained UFO sightings, which amount to approximately 10 percent of all UFO sightings reported. Do they pose a threat to national security? Are they just a funny-looking cover for an airborne Soviet presence? Even the possibility that these unknowns could be evidence of extraterrestrial visitations has been given serious attention in government circles.

While official interest in UFOs has long been thought to be strictly the concern of the Air Force, the bulk of whose records has been open to public view for nearly a decade, the recently released papers on UFOs indicate otherwise.

The departments of the Army, Navy, State and Defense, and the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the FBI, CIA and even the Atomic Energy Commission

the newest batch of records on UFOs from a bureaucracy that has for years denied their existence can be traced to the efforts of a handful of inquisitive individuals who, armed with the Freedom of Information Act, set off in the mid-70s on a paper chase of U.S. government documents on UFOs.

They include Bruce S. Maccabee, a Silver Spring, Md., physicist working for the Navy, who has managed to obtain the release of more than 1200 pages of documents on UFOs from the FBI; W. Todd Zechel of Prairie du Sac, Wis.; Robert Todd of Ardmore, Pa.; Larry W. Bryant of Arlington, Va.; and Brad C. Sparks, a student in astrophysics at Berkeley whose five-year pursuit of the CIA's UFO file eventually provided the foundation for a ground-breaking Freedom of Information lawsuit filed by Ground Saurer Watch (GSW), an Arizona-based UFO organization.

At the request of GSW director William H. Spaulding, Peter Gersten, an attorney in the New York firm of Rothblatt, Rothblatt & Seijas, filed a civil action against the CIA in December 1977 demanding all UFO records in the agency's possession.

The suit seemed to have achieved its goal when late last year the agency released about 400 documents, including nearly 900 pages of memos, reports and correspondence that attested to the agency's long involvement in UFO matters. But the civil action has not seen its final day in court.

By Gersten's account, the agency has arbitrarily withheld documents, made deletions without merit, and failed to conduct a proper search for UFO materials. The agency's current actions, he says, perpetuate its 30-year policy of deliberate deception and dishonesty about UFOs.

be labeled a



A government employee took this picture of an unidentified flying object that hovered over the Holloman Air Development Center near Alamogordo, N.M., for 15 minutes in July of 1957

General George F. Schulgen of Army Air Corps Intelligence requested the FBI's assistance "in locating and questioning the individuals who first sighted the so-called flying discs..."

Undoubtedly swayed by flaring Cold War tensions, Schulgen feared that "the first reported sightings might have been by individuals of communist sympathies with the view to causing hysteria and fear of a secret Russian weapon." J. Edgar Hoover agreed to cooperate but insisted that the bureau have "full access to discs recovered."

The Air Force's behind-the-scenes interest contrasted sharply with its public stance that the objects were products of misidentifications and an imaginative populace. A security lid was imposed on the subject in July 1947, hiding a potentially "embarrassing situation" the following month, when both the Air Force and the FBI began suspecting they might actually be investigating our own secret weapons. High-level reassurances were obtained that this was not so.

By the end of the summer, the FBI had "failed to reveal any indication of subversive individuals being involved in any of the reported sightings." A restricted Army letter that found its way to Hoover's desk said that the bureau's services actually had been enlisted to relieve the Air Force "of the task of tracking down all the many instances which turned out to be ashcan covers, toilet seats and whatnot." Incensed, Hoover moved quickly to discontinue the bureau's UFO investigations.

The UFO sightings were not handled

OSI chief H. Marshall Chadwell thought that our nation's defenses were running the increasing risk of false alert and, worse yet, "of falsely identifying the real as phantom." He suggested that a national policy be established "as to what should be told the public" and, furthermore, that immediate steps be taken to improve our current visual and electronic identification techniques so that "instant positive identification of enemy planes or missiles can be made." Ever vigilant, the CIA was keeping an eye on the possibility that UFOs could be of Soviet origin.

The government's efforts in the '50s and '60s to squelch public apprehension over UFOs went beyond debunking and even touched the fiber of constitutionally protected free speech.

According to author David Michael Jacobs, in 1953 the Air Force pressured Look magazine into publishing disclaimers throughout an article by retired Major Donald E. Keyhoe entitled "Flying Saucers From Outer Space." Then again, in 1965, the Army denied clearance for a prepublication review of a UFO-related article by one of its employees, Larry W. Bryant, a technical editor, until he took the issue to court.

Meanwhile, the CIA and the FBI proceeded routinely in the surveillance of UFO organizations and UFO enthusiasts. People with UFO interests were checked out by the FBI at the request of the CIA, the Air Force, or private citizens inquiring about possible subversive activities. Some caused as much concern as others, such as Major Keyhoe and others.

policy with one novel twist: UFOs "educationally harmed" schoolchildren who were allowed to use science study time to read books and magazine articles about UFOs. Condon wanted teachers to withhold credit from any student UFO project. The Air Force took the cue and disbanded their UFO project "Blue Book" in 1969.

Less than a decade later, the White House, perhaps in an attempt to make good Jimmy Carter's campaign promise to tell all about UFOs, suggested via science advisor Frank Press that possibly NASA could undertake a review of any significant new findings since Condon's study. NASA examined the offer, but saw no way to attack the problem on a scientific basis without physical evidence. They envisioned a public-relations nightmare if they were to accept such a project, and so rejected it.

A frank, in-house evaluation of NASA's options, however, noted that a hands-off attitude only begged the question.

So in good spirit, the space agency offered to examine any piece of physical evidence brought to its attention.

These days, the Air Force admits to nothing more than a "transitory interest" in the phenomenon, although military directives still exist for reporting UFOs.

The CIA is still wary of the possibility that UFOs may be of Soviet origin. "The agency's interest," says Katherine Pherson, a public-affairs officer for the CIA, "lies in its responsibility to forewarn principally of the possibility that a foreign power might develop a new weapons system that might exhibit phenomena that some might categorize as a UFO. But there is no program to actively collect information on UFOs."

The agency's interest cannot be denied, however, as two 1976 memos reveal.

The first, dated April 26, states: "It does not seem that the government has any formal program in progress for the identification-solution of the UFO phenomena. Dr. (name deleted) feels that the efforts of independent researchers, (phrase deleted), are vital for further progress in this area. At the present time, there are offices and personnel within the agency who are monitoring the UFO phenomena, but again, this is not currently on an official basis."

Another memo, dated July 14, and routed to the deputy chief in the Office of Development and Engineering, reads: "As you may recall, I mentioned my own interest in the subject as well as the fact that DCD (Domestic Collection Division) has been receiving UFO-related material from many of our S & T (Science and Technology) sources who are presently conducting related research. These scientists include some who have been associated with the agency for years and whose credentials remove them from the 'nut' variety."

If nothing else, the success of the UFO paper chase may have lent UFOs a measure of respectability that has eluded the subject for the past third of a century. Though it appears that no UFO sighting has ever represented an airborne Soviet or foreign threat, the possibility that such an event could occur remains foremost in the Cold War-conscious government mind.

Should that threat come to pass, military officials believe, our nation's sophisticated defense system would know about it before someone getting a glass of milk in the middle of the night sees the threat hovering outside the kitchen window. Or so we are made to understand the Air Force's seemingly nonchalant advice to the public: "If you see a UFO and you feel the situation warrants it, call your local police."

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From the New York Times Magazine



The path of a diamond-shaped object spotted in 1956 over Texas, an orb over Texas in 1965 and a UFO trail over New Zealand last year

sion produced UFO records over the years. Many of these agencies still do, and many of their documents remain classified.

But it is the CIA that appears to have played the key role in the controversy, and may even be responsible for the government's conduct in UFO investigations throughout the years.

UFOs have been the province of the nation's intelligence community ever since the beginning of the Cold War, when the notion took hold that some flying saucers might actually represent a secret, technologically advanced, foreign weapons system.

"Every time we were concerned," recalls Herbert Scoville Jr., a former chief of the CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence, "it was because we wanted to know: Did the Russians do it?"

As the Cold War gave rise to the fears of the McCarthy era, official concern over UFOs even led to the surveillance of several private UFO organizations (as many of their members have long insisted) and to the scrutiny of dozens of individuals suspected of subversive UFO activities.

Perhaps most telling of all, the government documents on UFOs reveal that despite official denials to the contrary, federal agencies continue to monitor the phenomenon to this day.

The monumental task of unearthing

"flying saucer" by the press occurred on June 24, 1947, when an Idaho businessman flying his plane near Mount Rainier observed nine disc-shaped objects making undulating motions "like a saucer skipping over water."

As early as World War II, Allied bomber pilots had told of "balls of light" that followed their flights over Japan and Germany.

A U.S. Eighth Army investigation concluded that they were the product of "mass hallucination."

When Scandinavians reported cigar-shaped objects in 1946, U.S. Army intelligence suspected that the Russians had developed a secret weapon with the help of German scientists from Peenemunde. The CIA, then known as the Central Intelligence Group, secretly began keeping tabs on the subject.

When the unknown objects returned to the skies, this time over the United States in the summer of 1947, the Army Air Force set out to determine what the objects were. Within weeks, Brigadier

during the summer of 1952. On the morning of July 28, the Washington Post revealed that UFOs had been tracked on radar at Washington National Airport, the second such incident in a week. Reporters stormed Air Force headquarters in the Pentagon, where switchboards were jammed for days with UFO inquiries. Military installations across the country handled such a volume of reports that "regular intelligence work had been affected," reported the New York Times.

These events prompted action at CIA headquarters, apparently at a request "from the Hill." From the start, the agency's involvement was to be kept secret. An August 1 CIA memo recommended that "no indication of CIA interest or concern reach the press or public, in view of their probable alarmist tendencies to accept such interest as 'confirmatory' of the soundness of 'unpublished facts' in the hands of the U.S. government."

The CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence (OSI) found that the Air Force's investigation of the UFO phenomenon was not rigorous enough to determine the exact nature of the objects in the sky. Neither did the Air Force deal adequately with the potential danger of UFO-induced mass hysteria, or the fact that our air vulnerability was being seriously affected by the UFO problem.

directed, the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP).

The CIA appears to have had a protracted interest in NICAP, which was founded in 1956 and utilized by Keyhoe as an organizational tool for challenging the alleged Air Force cover-up on UFOs. Both the CIA and the Air Force were upset by NICAP's wide-ranging influence. Its prestigious board of directors included, among others, Vice Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, the first CIA director (1947-1950).

"The Air Force representatives believe that much of the trouble ... with Major Keyhoe ... could be alleviated," states a CIA memo dated May 16, 1958, "if the major did not have such important personages as Vice Admiral R. H. Hillenkoetter, USN (Ret.) ... on the board ... Whether or not the Air Force got through to the admiral, Hillenkoetter resigned from NICAP in 1961 and the '60s saw continued CIA interest in NICAP."

In 1966, mounting discontent from members of the press, Congress and the scientific community compelled the Air Force to commission an 18-month scientific study of UFOs under the direction of Edward U. Condon, professor of physics at the University of Colorado.

The politically expedient study, in which one-third of the 91 cases examined remained unidentified, reiterated official