

NASA, the White House, and UFOs

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When any government agency is asked if it would like to expand the scope of its activities, the answer would seem to be a foregone conclusion, according to the well-known Parkinson's Law. Yet last year when the White House asked the National Aeronautics and Space Administration whether it believed that still another government investigation of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) should be conducted, under NASA's auspices, the agency's negative response seemed to deny the findings of Professor C. Northcote Parkinson as well as the strident claims of the UFO buffs. A decade earlier, the U.S. Air Force seemed to fly in the face of Parkinson's Law when it eagerly jumped at the opportunity to get out of the UFO business after twenty years, after a University of Colorado UFO study report confirmed USAF findings that there was no evidence of extraterrestrial visitations or any other extraordinary phenomenon.

Parkinson's Law has not been repealed, nor is it fundamentally invalid. But there is a more basic law of self-preservation that says that no government agency is anxious to take on a new task when it is the political equivalent of walking barefoot through a heavily seeded mine-field. And the UFO mine-field was more heavily seeded in 1977 than ever before. One reason is that President Jimmy Carter himself had a UFO-sighting back in 1969 when he was governor of Georgia.

If NASA had agreed to launch a new UFO study, certainly Carter's own sighting would have deserved a high priority on the agency's list of cases to be investigated, since the President could hardly be dismissed as a "UFO kook" or someone whose veracity could be questioned. And if NASA were to do a rigorous investigation, its findings would be embarrassing because the Carter UFO almost certainly would turn out to have been the planet Venus. This was the conclusion of Robert Sheaffer, a

member of the the UFO Subcommittee of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, after his own lengthy investigation and talks with persons who had been with Carter on the night of January 6, 1969. When these witnesses said that the UFO had appeared to them to resemble a bright star, Sheaffer, who studied astronomy, turned to his astronomical records. He discovered that a very bright Venus had been at the same azimuth and elevation angles that night at the time of Carter's sighting (*The Humanist*, July/August 1977).

It ought not embarrass the president to learn this, because Venus and other bright celestial bodies, especially when viewed through layers of haze, probably generate more UFO reports than any other single source. But because of the cloak of infallibility that always envelopes any occupant of the White House, and especially a Naval Academy graduate trained in celestial navigation, a NASA finding that the president's UFO was really Venus could hardly enhance the agency's political standing in White House circles, especially at budget-review times.

It was this Carter UFO-sighting, and an interview given during his presidential campaign to the tabloid *National Enquirer*, that subsequently embroiled NASA in the UFO issue. A long-standing cornerstone of the dogma of UFO buffs is that the U.S. Government "really knows the truth about UFOs" but that administration after administration has conspired to keep this truth under deep security wraps for more than thirty years. (This conveniently ignores the inability of the Nixon Administration to keep the Watergate scandal under wraps and the number of Central Intelligence Agency indiscretions that have emerged under Congressional scrutiny.)

The explanation for this alleged cover-up, according to UFO dogma, is that the "government is afraid that the public might panic" if faced with the prospect of extraterrestrial visitations. In support of this contention, the UFO buffs cite the aftermath of the famous Orson Welles radio dramatization of "The Invasion from Mars," broadcast on Halloween night in 1938. Yet the new Steven Spielberg-produced UFO movie about an extraterrestrial visitation, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, is playing to packed houses without producing panic in the theaters.

The *National Enquirer*, which gives a big play in its pages to UFO reports, put a reporter on Carter's campaign trail after learning of Carter's UFO-sighting. When the reporter asked Carter if he would release all of the government's classified UFO information if elected, it got a useful quote which was featured on the front page of its June 8,

1976 edition under the headlines "Jimmy Carter: The Night I Saw a UFO," with the subhead "... If elected I'll make all the Govt.'s UFO Information public." The precise quotation, contained in the accompanying article, was: "If I become President, I'll make every piece of information this country has about UFO sightings available to the public, and the scientists. I'm convinced that UFOs exist because I have seen one." Not a surprising response from a candidate who was then crusading for greater candor in government operations.

This Carter statement was widely hailed by the UFO buffs in their publications. At long last, after thirty years of secrecy, if Carter were elected, the public would finally learn the truth about UFOs. The new president had barely learned to find his way around the White House before the avalanche of letters and telegrams began to arrive. One typical letter, from a man in California who claimed he had been "zapped" and injured by a UFO, began as follows (and is reproduced exactly as written):

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT,

DURING YOUR PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN; YOU HAD MADE THE COMMITMENT, THAT YOU, SIR, WOULD RELEASE, TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, ALL OF THE *U.F.O.* SECRECY NOW HELD IN THE ARCHIVES OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, CONSISTING OF VARIOUS AGENCIES; YOUR ARTICLE WITH THIS COMMITMENT APPEARED IN THE *JUNE 8, 1976* ISSUE OF *THE NATIONAL ENQUIRER* NEWSPAPER. I HAVE VOTED FOR YOU, MAINLY FOR THIS REASON. I DO FAITHFULLY HOPE YOU WILL NOT DISAPPOINT ME, AS ONE OF MILLIONS OF CITIZENS WHO HAS VOTED FOR YOU . . .

When Dr. Frank Press, a noted geophysicist, was named the Presidential Science Advisor, his office was assigned the task of responding to the letters from the UFO buffs, many of them charging that the Defense Department, the USAF, and/or the CIA were withholding significant information on UFOs. Acting as the president's agent, Press's office wrote to the Defense Department and to the CIA to inquire about such alleged secrets and was officially informed that there were none. The Pentagon pointed out that all of the USAF's UFO files were now open to the public, in microfilm form, at the National Archives, and interested citizens could even purchase microfilm copies of the entire Air Force files on the subject.

Dr. Press sent a memo to the president reporting the results of his queries but its contents seemingly were not carefully read by some of the

president's top aides. One, believed to be press secretary Jody Powell, in a background briefing with a reporter for *U.S. News & World Report*, dropped a juicy tidbit that prompted the magazine to publish the following item in the "Washington Whispers" column of its April 18, 1977, issue:

Before the year is out, the Government—perhaps the President—is expected to make what are described as "unsettling disclosures" about UFOs—unidentified flying objects. Such revelations, based on information from the CIA, would be a reversal of official policy that in the past has downgraded UFO incidents.

This was good news to the UFO buffs. Clearly the president had not forgotten his campaign promise! At least one UFO buff, from Ft. Smith, Arkansas, during a trip to Washington, visited Dr. Press's office to volunteer his services to assist in any way in the big event. (My own response was to write a letter-to-the-editor, published in the May 9, 1977 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, offering 100:1 odds that no such "unsettling disclosures" on UFOs would occur by December 31, 1977. I had expected that such generous odds might induce a number of "takers," but I received no response—not even from a reporter on the magazine!)

Meanwhile, after receiving official denials that the Defense Department or CIA was withholding anything of significance on UFOs, Dr. Press's office was responding to the increased flow of mail from the UFO buffs with a form letter indicating that the government was not withholding vital information on the subject. But this did not prompt the UFO buffs to question their own dogma. Rather it brought vitriolic responses that President Carter, like his many predecessors, was trying to "keep the truth from the public."

In some instances, the White House asked the Defense Department to help it respond to the barrage of letters. But when the man from California, cited earlier, received a form-letter response from the office of the Secretary of the Air Force denying that UFO information was being withheld, the indignant UFO buff responded with a letter that included the following paragraph (unedited):

YOUR STOCK-LETTER REPLY TO ME IS ONE THE REPETITIOUS [S/C] STATEMENTS ABOUT "PROJECT BLUE BOOK," ETC., WHICH I AM TOTALLY FAMILIAR WITH SINCE 1969 . . . WHAT THE HELL HAS ANYTHING YOU SAY, IN

YOUR LETTER, OF MAY 25, 1977, HAVE TO DO WITH A REPLY TO MY LETTER TO:
PRESIDENT CARTER? NOTHING! . . . A COPY OF THIS LETTER-REPLY IS BEING
SENT TO PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER* ALSO: COPIES OF THIS COMMUNICATION
AND YOUR STOCK-LETTER REPLY WILL BE SENT TO MY CONGRESSMAN,
VARIOUS CONGRESSMEN AND SENATORS FOR THEIR COMMENTS AND PERUSAL.

Clearly, White House efforts to respond to letters from the UFO buffs were not winning any potential second-term votes for the president. And it would not help matters if such letters were simply ignored and left unanswered. And so, on September 14, 1977, Dr. Press wrote to the NASA administrator, Dr. Robert Frosch, asking his agency to take over the task of responding to letters from the public on the UFO issue. This was not an entirely new assignment, inasmuch as the space agency, understandably, had been the recipient of such queries prior to the new administration. NASA sent out a standard information sheet (76-6), dated July 1976, saying that "NASA is not involved in research concerning unidentified flying objects. Reports of unidentified objects entering U.S. air space are of interest to the U.S. military as a regular part of defense surveillance, but no government agency is conducting an ongoing investigation of UFOs at this time."

This statement flatly contradicted a part of the current UFO-buff dogma—that the U.S. Government had not really gotten out of the UFO business in 1969 when the Air Force closed down its Project Blue Book UFO office. At least some UFO buffs were sure this was simply a ruse and that government UFO investigations still were going on, secretly, in another agency.

The NASA information sheet also quoted the conclusions of a National Academy of Sciences panel, created to review the results of the University of Colorado investigation: "On the basis of present knowledge the least likely explanation of UFOs is the hypothesis of extraterrestrial visitations by intelligent beings." And the NASA statement concluded by providing the names and addresses of two private UFO groups engaged in the investigation of UFOs.

Within a few weeks the word was out that NASA had been asked for its views on whether it should launch a new government-funded UFO study. The timing could not have been worse for NASA, because Columbia Pictures had opened its multi-million-dollar publicity campaign to promote the new Steven Spielberg UFO-thriller, which previewed in New York and Los Angeles during the third week in November. The story published by the *Christian Science Monitor*, November 17, 1977,

reported: "A White House request to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration asks that the space agency consider becoming the government's focal point for a 'national revival' of interest in reports of UFO sightings." The article quoted an unidentified NASA project officer as expressing some reluctance to become involved in a new UFO investigation.

The widespread news-media coverage included an article by Deborah Shapley in the December 16 issue of the respected magazine *Science*, published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The article concluded: "Truth is as strange as fiction. The Air Force, officials say, indeed classifies some results of its inquiries made after UFO 'sightings'—many of which are made near military bases, and by men trained to observe the skies, and a few of which are investigated by Air Force men going up in planes. Press's office says that these facts, together with the conflicting responses the government hands out to UFO buffs who write in, keep alive this belief in a cover-up. Policies like these, officials say, need review and perhaps changing."

(When I called Ms. Shapley to ask whether she had checked out the claim that the Air Force "classifies some results of its inquiries made after UFO 'sightings'—many of which are made near military bases . . .," she told me that she had not, and had accepted the statements given to her by persons in the office of the Presidential Science Advisor. I told her that I believed she had been badly misinformed.)

In late December, NASA's Dr. Frosch wrote the following letter to Dr. Press informing the White House of its conclusions:

Dear Frank:

In response to your letter of Sept. 14, 1977, regarding NASA's possible role in UFO matters, we are fully prepared at this time to continue responding to public inquiries along the same line as we have in the past. If some new element of hard evidence is brought to our attention in the future, it would be entirely appropriate for some NASA laboratory to analyze and report upon an otherwise unexplained organic or inorganic sample. We stand ready to respond to any *bona fide* physical evidence from credible sources. We intend to leave the door clearly open to such possibility.

We've given considerable thought to the question of what else the United States might and should do in the area of UFO research. There is an absence of tangible or physical evidence for thorough laboratory analysis.

And because of the absence of such evidence we have not been able to devise a sound scientific procedure for investigating these phenomena. To proceed on a research task without a disciplinary framework and an exploratory technique in mind would be wasteful and probably unproductive.

I do not feel that we should mount a research effort without a better starting point than we have been able to identify thus far. I would therefore propose that NASA take no steps to establish a research activity in this area or to convene a symposium on this subject.

I wish in no way to indicate that NASA has come to any conclusion about these phenomena as such. Institutionally we retain an open mind, a keen sense of scientific curiosity and a willingness to analyze technical problems within our competence.

When those who had a hand in composing the NASA letter reviewed their final product, they probably saw it as the best response under the circumstances. It could not possibly give offense to any of the citizens who had reported seeing a UFO, including the president. Nor did NASA dismiss completely the possibility, however remote, of extraterrestrial visitations.

Instead, Frosch's letter sought to place the burden of proof where it rightfully belongs, on those who promote the extraterrestrial hypothesis, to come up with "tangible or physical evidence for thorough laboratory analysis." Knowing that thirty years of UFO reports had yet to produce a single piece of *credible* physical evidence of extraterrestrial visitations, NASA officials seemed to believe that there was in fact little if any *claimed* physical evidence. In this they were grossly in error. Having made this offer without having a thorough knowledge of UFOlogy, or consulting with those who have, NASA may soon regret it.

During the coming years, I predict, NASA will receive hundreds of pieces of tree branches that allegedly were broken by a UFO and burned grass, charred twigs, and soil samples allegedly taken from spots where UFOs reportedly landed. It will receive soil samples, some carefully prepared by hoaxers, to challenge the skills of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Research Center, not far from NASA's own Goddard Space Flight Center.

If rigorous laboratory analysis of five hundred such pieces of "tangible evidence" shows nothing extraordinary, perhaps the five-hundred-and-first will, the UFO buffs will insist. If NASA's patience runs thin, the determination of the UFO buffs is far more long-lived. One such piece of physical evidence submitted earlier to the USAF was the broken head of a hunting arrow, allegedly fired by the submitter at robots seen

near a landed UFO!

But still greater pitfalls await NASA, for it soon will discover that it must take far greater security precautions with UFO samples than it needed in handling lunar samples. For the latter, it was only necessary to ensure that none were stolen or diverted. For UFO samples, NASA must protect itself against later charges that the soil sample or tree branch it returned after analysis was not the same one submitted to it. There will be charges of substitution and claims that the original artifact now resides deep in underground security vaults at NASA or some other governmental agency.

This undoubtedly would seem far-fetched and paranoid to NASA officials today, because they probably are unaware that a NASA scientist already has been charged with such "hanky-panky" in a recent book by UFO-buff Ray Stanford. On April 24, 1964, a lone policeman reported that he saw an egg-shaped UFO land, in broad daylight, on the outskirts of the small town of Socorro, New Mexico. When Stanford visited the site shortly afterward as a UFO investigator, he picked up a rock that reportedly contained "metallic scrapings," seemingly left by the UFO as it brushed the rock.

On July 31, 1964, Stanford came to Washington and together with two other UFO buffs, including Richard Hall, then deputy director of a large UFO group with headquarters in Washington, drove to the Goddard Space Flight Center to give the rock to a NASA scientist there who agreed to analyze its "metallic particles" on an unofficial basis. Stanford claims that he asked the NASA scientist to "leave one-half of the particles on the stone's surface, so that I retain half the evidence" and the scientist agreed.

Stanford also alleges that the NASA scientist later told him: "I am virtually certain that the alloy involved here is not manufactured anywhere on Earth . . . I would make a statement to that effect, if you need it." But subsequently, Stanford charges, the scientist denied having made any such statement and said the "scrapings" on the rock were simply silica, a natural constituent. Stanford also charges in his book that when the Socorro rock sample finally was returned to him all particles had been removed, thereby depriving Stanford of any opportunity to have an independent analysis conducted. Stanford also accuses fellow UFO-buff Hall of having joined forces with NASA to suppress the Socorro evidence, an allegation that Hall flatly disavows along with Stanford's claim of hanky-panky by a top NASA scientist. But the Stan-

ford book has gained wide acceptance in UFO circles.

Thus, unless NASA handles every broken tree branch and soil sample as it would the Hope diamond, it can expect that Stanford's earlier, if ill-based, charges of hanky-panky will be raised again to "substantiate" the more recent allegations.

Truth in Advertising, UFO Dept.

Columbia Pictures opened its multimillion-dollar publicity barrage to promote the new Steven Spielberg UFO thriller, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, on April 10, 1977, some seven months before the film's preview, with a double-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major newspapers. The copy was sparse but provocative:

Watch the Skies

Over fifteen million Americans, including leaders in science, astronomy, the space program and government have officially reported UFO sightings. Scientists everywhere concede the overwhelming probability of intelligent life somewhere else in the universe.

Hundreds of verified sightings are reported every day from all over the world by reliable observers—and have been for the past thirty years.

This Christmas, millions of people will experience the most beautiful, frightening and significant motion picture adventure of all time.

It will start in an Indiana town and lead to four words which are becoming more and more apparent to all of us everyday: *We are not alone.*

On April 17, I wrote to the director of public affairs for Columbia Pictures mentioning current truth-in-advertising laws and asked for the names of the "leaders in science, astronomy, the space program, and government [who] have officially reported UFO sightings." Also I asked to whom the "hundreds of verified sightings [were] reported every day from all over the world by reliable observers" and who "verified" the reports.

When two months went by without a reply, I wrote on June 12 to the president of Columbia pictures, enclosing a copy of my original letter. I received no reply.

When *Close Encounters* previewed in New York and Los Angeles in late November, the copy in the Columbia advertisements suggested that my letters had, despite the lack of response, reached their intended mark. The copy read simply: "WE ARE NOT ALONE."—*Philip J. Klass*

(At present, Stanford is director of Project Starlight International, which operates a million-dollar UFO research facility near Austin, Texas. The facility includes elaborate flashing lights to attract UFOs, radar and telescopes to spot UFOs, cameras, and a laser that could be used for communication with the UFO. Stanford has never disclosed the source of the funds for what certainly is the best-instrumented UFO facility in the United States, if not in the entire world.)

Although NASA's decision not to initiate a new UFO investigation will be criticized by many UFO buffs, they can take solace in Frosch's reference, on two occasions, to "these phenomena." Seemingly this implies NASA recognition that UFOs exist as a phenomenon. In reality, the only thing known to exist with absolute certainty are UFO *reports*, suggesting that Frosch might better have used the term "these reported phenomena." For, as President Carter has demonstrated, a "reported UFO" can turn out to be a well-known phenomenon that was identified, and better named, long ago. ●