
News and Comment

Notes on the 1980 National UFO Conference

The seventeenth annual National UFO Conference was held at the Doral Inn in New York City last summer. I was one of the invited speakers. The names of the participants and of those in attendance were a "who's who" of UFOlogy. The principal organizer and venture capitalist of the conference was James W. Moseley of Gutenberg, New Jersey, a long-time UFO enthusiast.

Day One: New York City freelance artist George A. Rackus set up his sculpted "close encounter" alien heads (see photo) in the room where the press conference was about to begin. Stanton T. Friedman, who calls himself the "Flying Saucer Physicist," strongly objected to this display, calling it "creative fiction." However, he approved of a similar sculpture of an alien head that alleged UFO-abductee Betty Hill carries wherever she goes and which was resting on the table next to him. I said that I could not discern any real difference between the "authentic" alien sculpture and the fictionalized ones.

The press conference was well attended, mostly by the local media, and was reported by two major New York City TV news programs. Mike Luckman read a statement on behalf of the conference organizers that criticized Jimmy Carter for supposedly failing to

release all government UFO information. The various presidential candidates were called upon to take a public position on UFOs and to state whether or not they would end the alleged cover-up of UFO secrets. (At that time Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford were directly across the street at a fundraising affair in the Waldorf Astoria, but they took no notice of the challenge.) Luckman made much of the supposed UFO sighting by Jimmy Carter. When my turn came to speak, I pointed out that Jimmy Carter's "UFO" was almost certainly the planet Venus. Stanton Friedman agreed that Carter probably did not see a genuine UFO and that the case has little merit. Friedman disagreed that the object sighted was Venus, but he did not say exactly what he thought it was.

Friedman raised charges at the press conference of a "cosmic Watergate," alleging that the government has been suppressing evidence of "crashed saucers" for more than 30 years. The preserved bodies of little saucer creatures were said to be in the possession of the U.S. Government. He said that governments all over the world are hiding their saucer knowledge because none of them want their citizens developing "planetary consciousness."

Day Two: John Keel, author of *The Mothman Prophecies*, spoke on phantom submarines, mystery aircraft, and animal mutilations. One veteran observer of these conferences later said to me: "That sounded almost exactly like the lecture he gave here in 1967."

The next event was the debate between Stanton Friedman and me, the first public debate between a proponent and a skeptic at a major UFO conference. Friedman went first. He talked about the supposed mountain of eyewitness testimony about UFOs, without being specific. He cited the 2,000 alleged UFO landings catalogued by Ted Phillips of the Center for UFO Studies. He talked about abductions and radar sightings, again without specifics. He again talked about the supposed "cosmic Watergate," once more claiming a massive government cover-up. He talked about the Air Force's Blue Book *Special Report 14*, which broke down sightings into categories and then further into

"knowns" and "unknowns" (or "un-identifieds"). Friedman cited the differences between the "knowns" and the "unknowns," claiming that these differences showed that "unknowns" were definitely something other than Venus or weather balloons.

In my response I pointed out that UFOs always manage to slip away somehow before the evidence becomes too convincing, even if they fly over major cities like New York or Los Angeles. The Great Rocky Mountain Meteor of August 1972, for example, appeared unexpectedly and was visible for less than a minute, yet its picture was taken by many independent photographers. No UFO has ever been so widely seen or photographed.

As for Blue Book's *Special Report 14*, I briefly summarized Allan Hendry's arguments against the categories it used. (Hendry is the chief investigator for the Center for UFO Studies and is the author of the well-regarded *UFO Handbook*, reviewed in the Winter



"Close Encounters of the Third Kind": sculptures of supposed UFO aliens by George A. Rackus.

Robert Sheaffer

1979-80 issue of this journal.) Hendry notes that, under the Blue Book categories, a city bus looks very much like an elephant: both are greyish, have four appendages, and move very slowly.

Regarding the alleged suppression of UFO information, I referred to Philip J. Klass's article in the Spring 1980 SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, which quoted CIA memoranda revealing a complete lack of serious interest in UFOs. Besides, I argued, penalties for disclosing official secrets are *not* as tough as Friedman asserts, as Daniel Ellsberg and Victor Marchetti discovered. Some CIA agent would surely have revealed the government's UFO secrets by now, I said, if there were any. I invited Friedman to become more specific about his mountain of UFO evidence: *which* cases are the indisputably reliable ones? He never responded.

I brought up the Delphos, Kansas, physical evidence case of 1971. A UFO was said to have landed on a farm in Delphos, leaving a mysteriously disturbed ring of soil behind. The principal witness, Ronald Johnson, said he had subsequently seen a "wolf girl" on the farm and that several of the animals had had virgin births.

Klass and others investigated the case, but no one was able to determine the cause of the ring. The *National Enquirer's* Blue Ribbon UFO panel selected this case as providing the "most scientifically valuable" evidence of UFOs. But Jacques Vallee has recently had a sample of the soil analyzed in a laboratory in France, and he reports that the ring is actually a growth of the fungus *Actinomy-cetaceae*, genus *No-cardia*. Friedman, who was not familiar with Vallee's finding, said that he could not accept that explanation.

After the debate, Moseley asked for an "applause meter" to see who had



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Stanton Friedman selling UFO literature at the conference.

won. Not surprisingly, about three-quarters clapped for Stanton Friedman, one quarter for me. (Had the debate taken place after the next talk, I might have fared much better!)

Our debate was followed by a slide lecture given by Betty Hill, the famous "UFO abductee" (1961) from New Hampshire. She showed well over one hundred slides of "UFOs" taken at the "UFO landing spot" where she goes three times a week. The UFOs have not only fired laser beams at her car, blistering the paint, but actually burned holes in the metal, she said.

One of Betty Hill's UFOs was jellyfish-shaped. She noted that a "jellyfish UFO" was seen over Petrozavodsk, USSR, in 1977 and had allegedly damaged windows. She did not seem aware that James Oberg has shown the sighting was of a satellite launching (*SI*, Fall/Winter 1977). Most of her photos are frames from movie film. What was obviously a bright meteor in one photo was called a "carrier" or "mother" ship. Mrs. Hill said that it shot off smaller, "remote controlled UFOs." Another UFO, described as a "flying Y," looked remarkably like an airplane. Other

UFOs were clearly aircraft with flashing lights trailing across open film. One UFO had the letters "IUC" printed on its side (promoting perhaps the Inter-galactic Umbrella Corporation). Mrs. Hill also claimed that some of the UFOs made rapid right-angle turns, an impossible feat for conventional aircraft. But it looked to me as if these sudden movements were caused by the camera being bumped.

Betty Hill's talk dragged on for over an hour, and many members of the audience were audibly groaning and giving other signs of displeasure. After she finally finished showing her blurry UFO slides, one man, whom I did not recognize, directed a hostile question to Moseley, asking what precautions had been taken to prevent the audience's time from being wasted on such "rubbish." This man apparently was not aware that Betty Hill's testimony is a major pillar of "UFO evidence." Some members of the audience, however, jumped to Betty Hill's defense. Another question was directed to Stanton Friedman, asking in a highly skeptical vein why it is that Betty Hill sees all these dozens of UFOs in New Hampshire but no one else does. Friedman's answer was entirely supportive of Mrs. Hill: she spends more time looking up at the sky, etc. He did not in any way express any *public* doubt or reservations about these many sightings, although he *privately* says he does not believe her claims of recent sightings. Such inconsistency is necessary to Friedman, since he derives his income from pro-UFO lectures and writings, and the Hill case is his best evidence for the reality of extraterrestrial visitors.

The evening program began with Charles Berlitz, author of *The Bermuda Triangle*. Berlitz mentioned the celebrated underwater pyramid that he has



UFO "abductee" Betty Hill, with a sculpture of her alleged alien captor.

supposedly found in the Bermuda Triangle. He did not mention the \$10,000 challenge of CSICOP fellow Larry Kusche (*SI*, Fall 1978, p. 5). The money would have been his if he could show any convincing proof of the existence of this supposed pyramid. (He could not.) Berlitz focused his talk on the famous "Philadelphia Experiment," in which a Navy ship and its crew were reputedly teleported from Philadelphia to Norfolk and back. The newly published Doubleday *Encyclopedia of UFOs* (edited by Ronald Story and H. Richard Greenwell) contains an article under "Allende Letters" stating that the entire "Philadelphia experiment" was a confessed hoax.

—Robert Sheaffer

Nonexistent psi-gap

Uri Geller, the former psychic star, is currently on a tour doing his Chicken Little impression, warning the West that Soviet scientists are surging ahead in psi research and proclaiming a dangerous "psi-gap." The facts are somewhat less alarming.

The Soviet concentration on para-research took a steep dive back in 1978, after an expensive and extensive effort indicated that money and time was being wasted. August Stern, a Soviet parapsychologist, worked along with 60 colleagues for over two years trying to chart various forms of energy — including those believed to be responsible for ESP — in a manner similar to the way the elements have been arranged in the Mendeleev periodic table. He found nothing useful at all in his attempts.

The Soviet team applied electric shocks to new-born kittens to see if their mothers, isolated from them, would react. They watched people via TV monitors to observe the effect of beaming ESP signals at them. They even put bacteria on microscope slides, separating them effectively, to see whether they could transmit disease by means of photons through the barrier! The experiments were abandoned, in spite of the limitless funding available.

The press services, in covering these developments, found yet another way to confuse the issue by reporting that the Soviets were "trying to find a physical basis for psychic energy, or PSI particles, as they are called." The "psi" particle is in no way connected with the claims of the paranormalists but is a part of legitimate particle physics.

The "psi-gap" is a fiction. The sky is *not* falling.

Note: Jack Anderson's syndicated column for January 9, 1981, reported that the U.S. Defense Department has a top-secret "psychic task force" hard at work trying to develop "psychotronics," or ESP weaponry, to counter the supposed Soviet threat. The Defense Department spent at least six million dollars last year researching such "psychowarfare," Anderson reported. This Pentagon "ju-ju" team, as Anderson called it, had better have some second thoughts before wasting more of the taxpayers' money in pursuit of the psychic Easter bunny.

—James Randi

That was the year that wasn't (again)

We continue to think psychics' predictions are more interesting to read *after* the period for which they were made, rather than before. In keeping with our tradition of serving the public on these matters, we hereby offer some of the predictions made in the article "Ten Top Psychics Reveal Their Predictions for 1980," which appeared in the October 30, 1979, issue of the national weekly tabloid *Star*:

Senator Howard Baker will be our next president.

President Carter will announce at the last moment that he will not run for reelection.

Friction between the Vatican and a communist regime in Italy will lead to a siege of the Vatican and the exiling of the pope.

Space scientists [will] find evidence of a long-dead civilization on a planet in the solar system.

We will make contact with aliens from outer space during 1980.

NASA scientists will invent a machine that will enable us to overcome the force of gravity.

Johnny Carson will begin a new Tonight Show on another network.

Steve McQueen will make a tremendous comeback. . . .

—*K.F.*

FCC rules UFOs aren't of "public importance"

The Federal Communications Commission has concluded that UFOs are not an issue of "public importance." The subject therefore fails to meet the criteria under which distortions by the broadcast media could come under FCC purview.

The specific case concerns a radio program entitled "The UFO Report," broadcast for five consecutive days at 5:10 P.M. in April of 1980 on station KRKK in Rock Springs, Wyoming. Lee Roger Taylor, Jr., an assistant professor in the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts and the Division of Mathematical Sciences at Western Wyoming College in Rock Springs, filed a four-page complaint with the FCC about the series.

The series featured, among other things, an interview with psychologist Leo Sprinkle on the characteristics of extraterrestrial vehicles and their occupants, an interview with an alleged psychic who claimed to be in mental contact with extraterrestrial vehicles and their occupants, and an interview with a person who alleges he has had physical contact with "flying saucers" and that their occupants told him where to dig a well.

Taylor said the series, "in a pseudo-documentary format," was an "entirely biased presentation representing the so-called UFO phenomena as extraterrestrial flying saucers." The information it presented "was purely speculative fiction, totally lacking the weight of even the barest minimum of scientific evidence."

Taylor documented the fact that the station offered no disclaimer in any form. The program was presented as a news documentary, he said. "This was underscored by the fact that the series followed immediately — without a commercial break — on the evening news." One of the station's regular newscasters made each presentation.

When Taylor requested an opportunity to offer an opposing view "and/or scientific explanations for the phenomena and events described," the newscaster "flatly refused," said Taylor. "He then, within 5 minutes of our discussion, went on the air and sarcastically stated, 'Somebody wants to give an opposing view [to the UFO series] . . . I can't believe it.'"

The station manager said the series was classified as entertainment but acknowledged that because of the way the programs were handled some listeners may not have been able to distinguish the difference between the series and a regular news broadcast. Still, the manager failed to fulfill promises to offer equal time.

"In sum," Taylor concluded in his complaint, "the documentary-like format of 'The UFO Report,' containing unsupported and unscientific information, together with its total lack of objectivity and its refusal to allow the presenting of the opposing scientific view, constitutes a serious disservice to the listening public in this area." He called the production the "worst kind of mindless sensationalism" and a "callous exploitation of human gullibility" and

urged the FCC to investigate the matter and consider it when the station next requests renewal of its license.

After several exchanges, the FCC finally officially notified Taylor, on October 8, 1980, that it could take no action on his request. Stephen F. Sewell, acting chief of the Complaints and Compliance Division, noted that under the Fairness Doctrine "if a licensee presents one side of a controversial issue of public importance, it has an affirmative obligation to afford a reasonable opportunity for contrasting viewpoints in its overall programming." But it decided UFOs are not such an issue.

"The subject of UFOs appears to be controversial because numerous theories exist as to their substance and origins," said Sewell. Yet the complaint failed to establish that "belief in UFOs is of public importance," he said.

"An issue must be more than noteworthy in order to satisfy the 'public importance' portion of the Commission's definition: it must also be the subject of vigorous debate with substantial elements of the community in opposition to one another. In other words, does the issue involve a social or political choice, and will the outcome of that choice have a significant impact on the community or its institutions?"

"Each of your assertions regarding the UFOs fails to meet the Commission's criteria for establishing it as a controversial issue of public importance. Therefore, we can take no action."

Taylor also sent the complaint to the National News Council but was told it has a policy against considering complaints that are also being pursued in legal channels.

Taylor said he had felt "rather like Don Quixote fighting the windmills — only somewhat more at a loss." Yet it is interesting that once again an agency

has looked into the matter and decided that UFOs are hardly the issue of cosmic importance that many UFO enthusiasts make them out to be.

—Kendrick Frazier

Analysis of a "UFO" piece

"The UFO which exploded over a vast, desolate timber property in Queensland, Australia, scattered its intricate, eerily beautiful wreckage for several kilometers." So begins the preface of a recent book published in Australia entitled *Alien Honeycomb: The First Solid Evidence of UFOs*. The book was co-authored by John Pinkney, a columnist who claims to have been a UFO researcher for more than two decades, and by Leonard Ryzman, another UFO researcher.

According to the book's preface: "Most of the pieces [of the UFO] were collected by officers from the Royal Australian Air Force, which, without public announcement, immediately dispatched the material to the Pentagon laboratories for testing." This "global conspiracy" might have succeeded in withholding the "truth" from the public "but some of the wreckage was retrieved by private investigators — among them, the authors . . . The Queensland explosion has opened new vistas in aerial phenomenon research — chiefly because private citizens, for the first time, have managed to breach the iron wall of military secrecy that surrounds UFOs, to make fundamental new discoveries," the preface says.

"That is why, in the postscript to this book, we offer all the Queensland UFO pieces in our possession to the United Nations for further analysis. The Queensland explosion transcends the hardnosed, militaristic interests of the RAAF and the Pentagon. The gorgeous, hectically colored wreckage

retrieved from Greenbank promises to yield up scientific secrets that should be shared by all mankind," Pinkney and Ryzman wrote.

The United Nations showed no interest in analyzing the pieces of honeycomb material, despite a letter by the authors to the U.N.'s Kurt Waldheim. Pinkney and Ryzman were not willing to provide samples to others for analysis, for example, Dick Smith, head of Dick Smith Electronics, Ltd., of North Ryde, New South Wales. However, Smith was able to obtain a sample of the "alien honeycomb" from Mrs. Jean Fraser, who had reported finding the material a week after seeing a bright light in the sky in 1966, exact date uncertain.

Smith arranged to have the honeycomb analyzed by the University of New South Wales. The university's report on its analysis, dated September 25, 1980, said that the honeycomb was made with materials and fabrication techniques widely employed on this planet. The fiber-glass yarn used "has been manufactured in quantity in many countries throughout the world since the production of commercial grades began about 1938." And the report noted that "there were no unknown elements presented in the materials examined."

—Philip J. Klass

Seismic waves, not psi waves

Charles Tart, prominent parapsychologist at the University of California at Davis, appeared recently in Casper, Wyoming, to debate CSICOP members Paul Kurtz and James Randi. His opening remarks left Kurtz and Randi somewhat puzzled: Tart described how his conversion to belief in psi had been fortified when a woman friend gave him an account of a strange experience she

had had. This provided a perfect opportunity to examine the tendency of believers in psi to attribute paranormal causes to some events, just because a normal, more probable explanation doesn't come to mind.

Tart described how his friend had been startled in the dead of night and had jumped out of bed with a premonition of a major disturbance of some kind. As she stood at the window wondering what it could have been, the panes shook from a heavy sound wave, the result of an explosion some 30 miles away!

How could the sleeper have been awakened by an occurrence 30 miles distant before the sound wave arrived to announce the event? A bit of high-school physics solves it for us, and I checked with a geologist present who came up with verification within a few minutes. An explosion at that distance would produce a shock wave (pressure wave) that would travel in the air and in the rock. The wave would arrive in approximately 7 seconds, while the air wave (sound wave) would take 2 minutes, 26 seconds. Thus the sleeper was probably aroused by the very substantial ground wave and had time to get to the window, aware that something had happened, only to be greeted by the window-rattling sound wave 2 minutes, 19 seconds later.

—J. R.

Selective test-selection

While testing water diviners on my recent trip to Australia, an important factor in evaluating psi research was illustrated once again. One diviner, having totally failed the tests, still stuck by his claim that his usual success average was "100 percent." Queried further, he told us that he did not count his failures in this determination, since

"obviously, when I fail, the powers aren't working at that time, and, after all, I'm counting percentages on the cases where I'm divining, not when I'm just guessing!"

Perhaps we cannot expect more than that degree of logic from an amateur, but when Dr. Arthur Hastings, one of the major figures in the Targ-Puthoff "remote viewing" investigations at SRI International viewed the critique by Kammann and Marks [*SI*, Winter 1978-79, and *Nature* 274 (1978): 680], and their attempted replication of the findings, Hastings found no difficulty in declaring that K. and M. failed

because no "remote viewing" was taking place when they were testing!

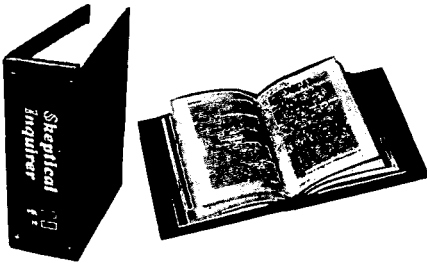
We often read of highly regarded psi tests in which the method includes a set of preliminary "warm-up" sessions. How tempting it is, when the preliminaries show positive results, just to move ahead with the tests, counting these unofficial warm-ups as part of the tests proper. After all, it is obvious that "the powers" are working at that point. And how many series of tests have been aborted or not reported because "the powers aren't working at that time"? One wonders.

—J.R.

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