The Internet: A Shining Beacon of Truth

Where have all the UFOs gone? In recent months, three widely read articles have been published by thoughtful observers, suggesting that UFOs are no longer being seen because they've been "chased off by the Internet." This represents the first time, to my knowledge, that anyone has suggested with a straight face that the Internet kills off nonsense and misinformation almost as effectively as Raid kills roaches.

First, this past November 9, Douglas Kern suggested in the online journal *Tech Central Station* that the "Internet Killed the Alien Star" (see www.techcentralstation.com/110905A.html). He writes that "the rise of the Internet taught the world to be more skeptical of unverified information," apparently wholly unaware of the Internet's role in promoting and spreading the wildest conspiracy stories about the September 11 attacks that are now finding increasingly wide acceptance. He seems to think that widespread belief in UFOs was a nineties thing, like disco globes in the seventies: "I'm quite happy to leave the aliens in the nineties, and on the milk cartons." Yet it is only since 2003 that the alleged 1965 UFO crash at Kecksburg, Pennsylvania, has assumed classic proportions, abetted by a sensationalist "documentary" on the Sci-Fi Channel—and of course by the Internet. This is in spite of skeptical information readily available since the early 1990s that the "crash" was nothing more than hysteria over the Great Lakes Fireball of December 9, 1965 (see "'Old Solved Mysteries': The Kecksburg Incident," by Robert R. Young, *SI*, Spring 1991). If Kern is correct, belief in the Kecksburg crash and the September 11 conspiracies should be fading away, not growing.

Next, on March 31, Ben Macintyre wrote in *The Times* of London that the ETs had "flown home—chased off by the Internet" (see www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,1068-2111848,00.html). He suggests that "The Internet works by taking in vast swaths of hokum and ignorance but it gradually sifts out the chaff." He seems to think this is an automatic process, like old cars falling apart, forgetting that it takes human effort to make it happen. Today's UFO proponents are as willfully blind to skeptical information on the Web as they were in the days when it was available only in print, and TV producers seeking sensationalism and the sensational ratings it brings can ignore skeptical Web sites as easily as they did skeptical books. Correction of error is a process requiring human intervention, and so long as there are many humans who find misinformation more charming than fact, error will flourish, no matter how readily available the facts are.

Finally, on April 22, Iain Hollingshead asked in *The Guardian,* "Whatever happened to . . . UFOs?" (www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1758839,00.html). He suggested, "it would appear that public interest in UFOs has waned significantly since the 1970s film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*." Note that Hollingshead thinks that the heyday of UFOs was the 1970s, while Kern thinks it was the nineties. Hollingshead continues, "Today, however, rational explanations appear to exist for most UFO sightings," as if they did not in the 1950s and 1960s, when the U.S. Air Force gave explanations for about 95 percent of reports it received (and even the late Dr. J. Allen Hynek, while criticizing and reevaluating the Air Force data, came up with nearly identical percentages). Of course, UFO zealots derided and ignored rational explanations printed during the 1950s as easily as they do those posted on skeptical Web sites today. Hollingshead does not directly blame the Internet for killing off UFOs, suggesting only that "the craze has simply run its course," although he quotes Roy Lake of London UFO Studies as saying, "The Internet killed it off."

None of these fine gentlemen has any background in the UFO field, or has made any detailed investigations of any cases. None seems to realize that the last large-scale classic wave of "UFO sightings" in the U.S. occurred in 1973, about twenty-five years before the

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Internet would be able to exert any noticeable cultural effect. Perhaps the Future Shock of the coming Internet revolution set up a shockwave that traveled back in time and squelched the sightings? In reality, the widespread availability of color TV probably played a much bigger role than anything else in dampening UFO sightings, by keeping people indoors and well-entertained and not outdoors, where they might puzzle over Venus or a weather balloon. (Color TV sets were scarce in the mid-sixties, and did not reach a majority of TV households until 1972.)

If peak interest in UFOs can be equated to peak reports of sightings, then the peaks occurred in 1952, 1957, and 1966. UFO sightings and related claims have always come in waves, with pronounced peaks and valleys. We do indeed seem to be in a valley at the present time, but it is wrong to conclude from this that we will never again see a peak. I well recall the deep UFO valley experienced during the mid-1980s. There were some at this time who pronounced that UFOs had run their course and would never fly again. I also recall the late Philip J. Klass chuckling over such pronouncements, saying, "UFOs can't be killed off so easily. They'll be back!" And events soon proved Klass correct.

In 1987, Bill Moore and Jamie Shandera made a huge splash announcing the "discovery" of supposedly secret government papers about a crashed-saucer group known as MJ-12, and government UFO conspiracies were soon all the rage. This craze, like all others, ran its course, but Hopkins/Jacobs/Mack-style UFO abductions were quickly rising to augment it, and when these in turn began to fizzle, new crash-conspiracy yarns from Roswell and elsewhere sounded fresh and exciting enough to generate their own buzz for a few years. Now that all these excitements have been widespread for several years and have led nowhere, just like all previous mega-claims, the field will remain quiet until some new-sounding gimmick or angle grabs the public's attention in a big way. Novel UFO claims typically swell up quickly among UFOlogists, but as soon as it's clear to most of them that their newest treasured evidence is not going to be the long-awaited Holy Grail that will finally reveal the truth about UFOs to an unbelieving world, they start losing interest in it.

"It's hard to remember just how large UFOs loomed in the public mind a mere ten years ago," writes Kern, trying to jog the reader's distant memories by bringing up sensationalist TV shows about Roswell and the like. Apparently he has not been watching television recently. On March 16, the History Channel gave us five hours of uninterrupted UFO inanity, including some of the worst sensationalist twaddle masquerading as documentary fact that I've ever seen. *Real UFOs* included confident assertions about supposed "Nazi flying saucers," claims founded upon, well, other claims, which in turn are based upon still earlier claims, and so on. Despite decades of such claims, remarkably growing stronger and more widespread despite the reported UFOcidal effect of the Internet, nobody has yet turned up a single photograph or blueprint of any saucer-shaped craft allegedly created by the Third Reich. Despite this breathtaking dearth of evidence, the History Channel confidently assured us that the Nazi saucers flew using "magnetic effects" to produce "levitation," a trick that would still baffle present-day science, assuming it were actually done.

This abomination of disinformation was followed by a two-part show *Alien Engineering*, which was acknowledged to be based solely on imagination and conjecture. In that show, a hypothetical panel of expert scientists is invited to examine a hypothetical UFO that is alleged to have crashed at Roswell. The panel discovers that the UFO flew using "inertia cancellers" to allow it to make sharp turns at high speeds. This makes it sound like a device we might start building next week, except that physics offers no theories of how a workable "inertia canceller" might function. The saucer's propulsion system was "found" to operate using either an "anti-gravity drive," or else a "force-field generator"—apparently even top scientists can't always agree on such details. To solve the problem of faster-than-light travel, the saucer was said to employ a "wormhole generator" with a "stabilizer" to keep the wormhole open—those pesky wormholes keep closing up if you forget to turn on your stabilizer. No explanation was given of how the saucers grab onto the fabric of space-time to warp and rend it, but in the Land of UFOria, such explanations are not needed. While such terms may sound perfectly reasonable to a generation raised on *Star Wars* and

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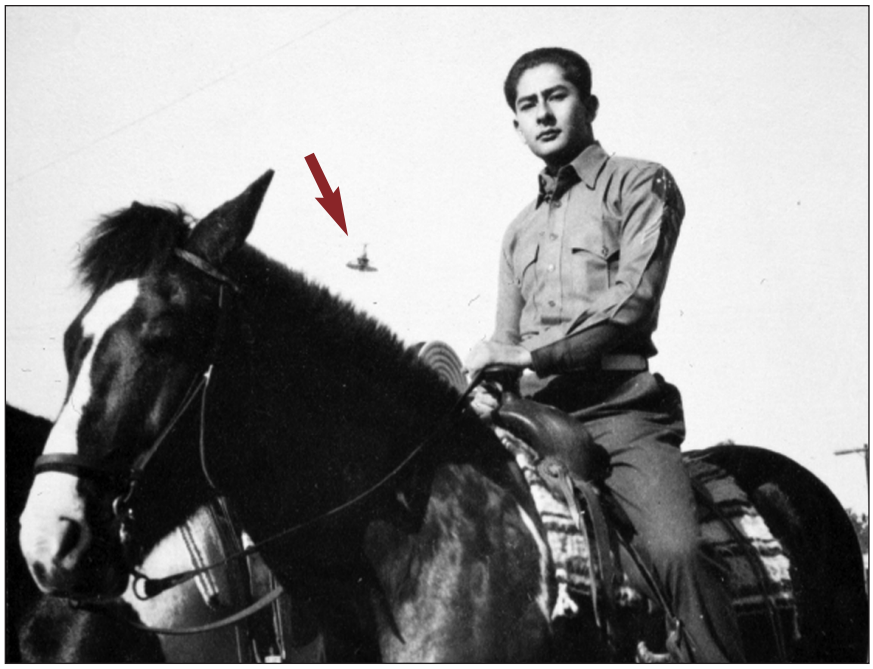

The 1945 "Jack LeMonde" UFO photograph.

Star Trek, to anyone who has studied physics, they are little more than gibberish. Then, on March 27, the History Channel again served up a heaping platter of junk food in the form of a documentary on the Bermuda Triangle. I don't know why the Internet's Truth Beacon hasn't yet shot down that specious claim (let alone the abysmally inaccurate history now so fashionable in *The Da Vinci Code*).

Meanwhile, the buzz among certain "serious" UFOlogists is that the recent sudden shakeup at the CIA is related to "exopolitics," the supposed diplomatic dealings between the U.S. government and extraterrestrials. Ed Komarek, a tireless advocate for supposed "UFO disclosure," writes that "In the 1950s treaties seem to have been made in secret under the highest security between the United States government and one or more extraterrestrial races." On May 8 he wrote, "It has been suggested that [anonymous] has been close to Porter Goss who has recently resigned as head of the CIA. It has also been suggested that [anonymous] is pro [UFO] disclosure or at least not inclined to stand in the way of disclosure. Also suggested is that there has been a move afoot within the CIA pressing for disclosure, with [anonymous] being a key figure." So there you have it—Goss was preparing to spill the beans about saucers, and thus had to go. Komarek probably knows the secret handshake that gets him info on all the UFO conspiracies.

It was Marty Kottmeyer who gave us the best insight into what is really happening: UFOs as an "evolving system of paranoia," adapting itself to the peculiar obsessions and fears of its host society. It is not difficult to see the origins of early flying-saucer reports and the claims of 1950s "contactees" in Cold War fears over atomic weapons and missiles. As American society gradually evolved toward other concerns and fears, our fantasies changed with it. By the 1980s, popular obsessions over "victimology" and New Age narcissism caused claims of clandestine "UFO abductions" to be far more compelling than mere sightings of lights in the sky. When Budd Hopkins published his *Missing Time* in 1981, claiming that aliens were sneaking into peoples' bedrooms late at night and secretly beaming sleepers up to hovering saucers, the book spoke directly to the popular culture of its time, and the world of UFO belief was forever changed. In this Age of Oprah, people do not obsess over possible ETs flying overhead, but instead over what invisible ETs might secretly be doing to *them.* By the late nineties, Hopkins-style "abductions" were starting to lose their pizzazz (even UFOlogists get bored with claims that go on for decades but somehow never get confirmed), so the big push over Roswell "crashed-saucer" claims largely supplanted them as the focus of UFOlogy. Today, conspiracy theories are all the rage, and the best way to become famous in UFOlogy is to think up a new one that will grab peoples' fancy. If the Internet killed off UFOs, what are all those aliens doing on my TV screen?

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The 1945 UFO photograph known as the "Jack LeMonde" photo (a pseudonym meaning "the world") created a lot of interest in "serious" UFOlogical circles when it first surfaced in 2000 (see www.nidsci.org/news/lemonde.php). It shows a young Marine seated on a horse, and was taken at a riding stable in Burbank, California. Behind him, a round metallic-looking object is clearly seen, with a tall and ornate tower protruding. Because "flying saucers" were unknown in 1945, the "blemished" photo was quietly pasted away in a family photo album, its "saucer" only attracting attention much later. UFOlogist John Alexander recently met with the now-elderly "Jack LeMonde," and was impressed by his sincerity and modest ways. However, objections soon began to be raised, suggesting that the "UFO" was just a light fixture suspended on a wire. Alexander held fast, arguing that no supporting wire could be seen in the photo (perhaps not realizing how easy it was for such small details to get washed out), and that the city of Burbank was using different streetlights at the time, anyway. Recently, a French-language Web site (http://rr0.org/Dossier/1945_LeMonde) revisited the photograph, showing how an enhancement of contrast does indeed bring out something looking very much like a wire running over to the "UFO." Furthermore, a photo was located that shows a hanging streetlamp in nearby Pasadena used since the 1930s, identical to the UFO in the photo. No word from Alexander or other UFOlogists about whether they're ready to relinquish this treasure. □