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Flying Saucers Are Real! The US Navy, Unidentified Flying Objects, and the National Security State

Robert P. Horstemeier

In 1947, a fire-control-equipment salesman, Kenneth Arnold, flying his private plane, claimed to sight nine mysterious objects flying in the area of Mt. Rainier. He told his story to aircrews when he landed and newspapers picked it up, quickly beginning to call the things "flying saucers." In the two weeks following Arnold's report hundreds of accounts appeared in the media or were conveyed to the government as people in all walks of life found objects in the sky that could be seen as flying saucers. After investigating these reports in 1948 (as Project SIGN), the brand-new US Air Force closed the investigation and initiated Project GRUDGE, which was principally a public relations effort to debunk the reports. If this effort had succeeded, flying saucers might have been construed after the manner of sea serpents, i.e. as a continuing folklore based on occasional reports of anomalous things that remained controversial, but were of little consequence. However, at a critical juncture, when the flying saucer excitement seemed to have petered out in 1949, members of the US Navy sought to influence public opinion in ways that would undermine GRUDGE propagandas, flying in the face of Air Force intelligence requirements. For some, present at the creation of the national security apparatus, factional disputes and turf wars would have an extraterrestrial dimension.

The idea of aliens from other worlds, capable of space travel and visiting the Earth, is one of the most common in science fiction literature. The ways in which this idea became a social reality for ever-increasing numbers of earthlings impacted the national security establishment of the United States in a variety of consequential ways. The best known is the Air Force attempt to debunk the subject, which is generally misunderstood because it is taken out of context. Happy themselves to appropriate SF imagery when it suited their purposes,

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Notes

1. I use the neutral term "advocate" since I do not know with certainty whether all the Naval supporters of the extraterrestrial origin of flying saucers were, in fact, believers.

Some certainly were, but I cannot rule out the possibility that cynical shenanigans were also in play.

2. My interpretation of the believer/skeptic binary pertains to the period of the 1950s when beliefs were relatively simple. During the 1960s a small group of professional scientists brought to the believer community an open-minded curiosity about the possible scientific implications of UFOs; its key figure, J. Allen Hynek, eventually founded the Center for UFO Studies. On the skeptical side, during the 1970s and 1980s, a “psychosocial” school of explanation grew in Europe around John Rimmer and the magazine Magonia. While these investigators were more sophisticated than their predecessors, the basic lines of argument defining the binary continued as before.

3. In the interests of full disclosure I confess that I am a UFO percipient. In 1973 I participated in a multiple-witness close encounter (defined as a UFO experience of an object close enough to reveal detail). At the time I was reading a lot of descriptive phenomenology. Possibly in the light of this, I was not predisposed to accept any of the socially available interpretive models as being of particular help in identifying what I had seen. Nonetheless, my perplexity enabled me to distance myself from proper skepticism as well as from the flying saucer mythos.

4. The Pacific Northwest, where the flying saucer excitement of 1947 began, is close to Russia, a geographical detail not unappreciated by early commentators on the subject, both inside government and in the media.

5. A range-finding instrument.

6. Although Lawrence's name did not appear as the byline for the unattributed US News story, he was generally regarded as its source in contemporary news accounts. He published the news weekly and wrote versions of the claim in two of his newspaper columns. Time regarded his citation of the US News story in his column, without noting his role as publisher, as disingenuous. I shall follow Lawrence's contemporaries and refer to the US News account as well as the two columns as authored by Lawrence.

7. H.P. Blavatsky, founder of modern theosophy and of the Theosophical Society, claimed to have received her eclectic, mystical philosophy through the guidance of spiritual masters who had ascended to the astral plane (which she popularized). Unencumbered by material bodies, they constituted the Great White Brotherhood.

8. Jung interpreted UFOs as a symbol of wholeness, integration and the unknown self. His coyness regarding the physical reality of the phenomenon enabled believers in the ET hypothesis to claim him as a supporter, despite the main thrust of his arguments, which did little to distinguish genuine reports from dream experiences, inasmuch as his focus was on the archetypal significance of flying saucers.

9. Another local informant added to FBI suspicions by offering his opinion that Adamski was “a very brilliant individual who gives the community the impression that he is mentally unbalanced because of his ‘Space Ships’.” A member of the Adamski group told the visitors a friend had returned from Russia with tales of free opera tickets and an easy life. Had contact with Russia been transformed into contact with other planets?

10. This is a reference to the Civilian Saucer Intelligence of Los Angeles, a secular private investigation.

11. In his Illuminatus trilogy, Wilson uses this term to refer to the attempts of his conspirators to bring the end of the world near.

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