

A Time To Talk Sense About UFOs

UFOs—The Public Deceived. By Philip J. Klass. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1983. 310 pp. \$17.95.

Reviewed by Elmer Kral

For many centuries, the subject of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe has intrigued writers, theoreticians, and laymen. Since World War II, however, nearly everyone has become curious about the subject, and the rhetoric in some quarters has gradually moved from curiosity to speculation to belief that intelligent beings not only exist elsewhere but that they have already visited us. A Gallup poll in mid-1978, for example, revealed that 57 percent of adult Americans believe that UFOs are "real."

Is this belief justified or is it a myth? On the surface, it would appear that there is some basis for it. The worldwide scientific community generally agrees that the search for intelligent life elsewhere is a legitimate, though low-priority activity. Rational citizens are persuaded by the argument that if our civilization can send astronauts to the moon and spacecraft beyond, then technologically advanced civilizations could very well send explorers to our neighborhood of the universe. And much of the UFO and other popular literature has asserted for over thirty years that we have been visited.

In reality, it is a myth. While almost all scientists concede that there is at least a mathematical possibility that intelligent life may exist elsewhere, several scientists and other professionals since at least 1953 have convincingly refuted the assertion that UFOs represent alien spacecraft, beings from another "dimension," or something genuinely new to science. Most prominent among them are Donald H. Menzel and Edward U. Condon.

The latest to do so in convincing fashion is Philip J. Klass, author of the recently published *UFOs—The Public Deceived*. A respected senior avionics editor of *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, a founding member of CSICOP, and author of two previous UFO books—*UFOs Identified* (Random House, 1968) and *UFOs Explained* (Random House/Vintage, 1974), Klass has been a leading investigator of UFO reports and an authority on the subject for almost two decades.

In his new book, he provides prosaic explanations for the major UFO reports and events since his earlier books, including the so-called "best cases" advanced by many UFO proponents, and confirms his previous findings that the belief is a myth. He also argues that this myth is being kept alive by those eager to promote belief in UFOs, aided by some members of the news media who do not investigate thoroughly before publicizing extraordinary claims.

The arguments in *UFOs—The Public Deceived* are presented throughout

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the 31 chapters, or 310 pages hardbound, by means of thorough, detailed explanations and analyses with full documentation in the text and in a separate section of 22 photographs/illustrations, and are presented in a style accessible to any layman who possesses the ability to read at the high school level or for anyone familiar with the subject. Intertwined with the explanations are revelations of the methods and ethics of many of the major promoters of the UFO myth and relevant historical information that provides the reader with a 30-year evaluation of the entire subject.

In the first five chapters, Klass refutes the claims of the proponents that the CIA and other U.S. government agencies have withheld or covered up significant information about UFOs. In 1976, all of the Air Force Project Blue Book files were transferred to the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where microfilm copies of the roughly 80,000 pages of material, including photos, were made available without restrictions to anyone. In 1978, the CIA released nearly 1,000 documents under the Freedom of Information Act, and other agencies released many more. Klass quotes from CIA documents through mid-1976 that reveal there is no channel or working group on UFO reports in the intelligence community, and that the CIA's only involvement in the subject occurred in 1953, when from January 14 to 17 it convened the Robertson Panel, a five-member group of distinguished scientists whose findings caused the CIA to lose interest in the subject a few weeks later.

To date, the CIA has refused to declassify 57 pages, and the National Security Agency 135 pages, for security reasons. UFO proponents have not found evidence of coverup or wrongdoing in the material released thus far but claim, if the government could be forced to release these remaining 192 pages, they would reveal the government knows that UFOs are extraterrestrial craft. Klass asserts that the 192 pages could be withheld to protect the names of contacts within the USSR and elsewhere who helped U.S. agents determine in the early 1950s if UFOs might be a Soviet development. He argues that, if and when the U.S. government learns the earth has been visited, interested agencies will generate very many more pages of memoranda on the subject—probably thousands within a year—and that “it will be impossible to keep the startling fact from the public.”

In Chapters 8 through 13, Klass reveals that the causes of the vast majority of UFO reports are misidentified natural phenomena and manmade objects, misunderstanding of the limitations of radar-electronic equipment, misunderstanding of changing atmospheric conditions and optics, unreliability of eyewitness testimony, and overactive imaginations. Jimmy Carter's formal report in 1973 of a UFO he sighted on January 6, 1969, turned out to be the planet Venus. In the late fall of 1975, UFOs reported near and over SAC bases in the U.S. and bases in Canada by military and civilian personnel were really stars and planets, a private helicopter, and perhaps meteors or even birds. In 1976, a UFO reported in central California was really a missile launched from Vandenberg AFB. In 1977, UFO reports in several metropolitan areas nationwide were caused by advertising planes. Klass also cites statistics from the Center for UFO Studies that reveal over 90 percent of the reports, many coming from law enforcement officers, are misidentifieds, 18 percent of which are advertising planes and 25 percent celestial objects. And he states that “UFO reports that prove to be IFOs show that intelligent people, including pilots, scientists, and law enforcement

officers, unwittingly embellish their accounts with inaccurate details and seeming cause-effects that are unrelated. It follows logically that similar inaccuracies in other UFO reports may prevent their explanations."

In Chapter 14, he explains that nighttime UFO reports of September 19, 1976, near Teheran, Iran, involving two Iranian Air Force jet fighters were likely caused by electrical-electronic equipment malfunction, lack of maintenance, inadequate pilot training for night missions, celestial objects, and a possible meteor from the Aquarids and Southern Piscids.

In Chapters 16 and 17, he reaffirms his previous explanation of the nighttime UFO report of October 18, 1973, by an Army helicopter crew near Mansfield, Ohio, as a result of pilot reaction under stress, normal radiocommunications difficulties, and most likely a meteor from the Orionids.

In Chapters 18 through 23, Klass explains the Travis Walton report of a UFO abduction of November 5, 1975, near Heber, Arizona, as a hoax.

In Chapter 24, he explains Deputy Sheriff Val Johnson's report of a nighttime UFO attack on his patrol car on August 27, 1979, near Warren, Minnesota, as a hoax.

In Chapters 25 through 27, he declares the nighttime UFO report of a civilian pilot, a television camera-crew, and others just after midnight on December 31, 1978, off the east coast of New Zealand near Wellington to be the "best-documented UFO incident of all time" because of 16 mm color-film, tape-recorded commentary, detection by radar-electronic equipment, and multiple independent witnesses. He then explains the report as the result of Japanese squid boat lights, celestial objects, misunderstanding of the limitations of radar-electronic equipment, and possibly ground lights. In this section, too, Klass reminds the reader that "many UFOlogists are not impressed by UFO reports that involve lights at night, especially when the lights remain essentially motionless, as in this incident, because they usually have prosaic explanations." This is borne out by the statistics he cites from the Center for UFO Studies, which reveal that 93 percent of 1,103 nocturnal-light cases investigated by Allan Hendry were found to have prosaic explanations, and of the remainder, only 1 percent were classified as "best nocturnal lights."

In Chapter 30, Klass explains the report of a crashed saucer on June 14, 1947, near Roswell, New Mexico (resurrected in 1980 by publication of a book by authors Charles Berlitz and William L. Moore), as debris of instrumentation from a crashed balloon-borne radar calibration device and a rumor/hoax, and the report of three crashed saucers in 1948 in New Mexico as a hoax.

The conclusion that Klass draws in his closing Chapter 31 is "that roughly 98 percent of all UFO reports are simply misidentifications of prosaic, if sometimes unfamiliar objects by basically honest observers and that the balance, roughly 2 percent, are self-delusions or hoaxes by persons who like to spin tall tales and become instant celebrities."

What about Klass's argument that the myth has been kept alive and the public deceived "by those eager to promote belief in UFOs, abetted by seemingly responsible news media that have shirked their responsibility to investigate thoroughly before publicizing extraordinary claims." What follows are some examples of case studies I have selected from the book. I leave it to the reader to interpret them.

- William G. Spaulding, director of the Phoenix-based Ground Saucer-

Watch Group, reported to the media that 1,000 pages of CIA documents reveal that UFOs exist and are real, that the U.S. government has been totally untruthful, and that the coverup is massive. The *New York Times* based a feature story, "CIA Papers Detail UFO Surveillance," published on January 14, 1979, on Spaulding's information. Several other major newspapers nationwide did the same. Tom Snyder interviewed Spaulding on the NBC-TV "Tomorrow" show on February 2, 1979, when Spaulding read selected quotes from CIA documents to support his interpretations and stated that "there are many, many other pages that we just wouldn't have time to read." (See Introduction and Chaps. 1-3.)

- Peter A. Sturrock, a Stanford University astrophysicist, a member of the American Astronomical Society (AAS), and an organizer of conferences to which UFO proponents, but not experienced skeptics, were invited, authorized a three-page press release from his institution announcing the results of his survey of 2,611 AAS members on the subject of UFO reports. The results of the five-choice responses to the question reveal 52 percent of the respondents favored study of "the UFO problem," 21 percent were opposed, and 27 percent responded "possibly." Klass's analysis of the study reveals that "the collective view of all 1,356 AAS respondents was that the probability that a UFO sighting might involve an extraterrestrial craft was only 3 percent—the lowest figure of any of eight options" and that "only 7 of the 1,356 respondents indicated they were actively working in the field of UFOlogy." Based on Sturrock's press release, the *New York Times* titled an article on March 17, 1977, "Further Study on UFOs Endorsed in a Survey," and the *Christian Science Monitor* titled a story on April 27, 1977, "Probe UFO Riddle, Say Astronomers." Since then, Sturrock has organized a new group, named the Society for Scientific Exploration, whose members, Klass believes, will make the same mistakes their predecessor UFO proponents did. (See Chaps. 7 and 30.)

- Todd Zechel, a UFO proponent who was instrumental in securing documents in 1978 under the FOIA, talked with staff writer Michael Satchell, who wrote the article "UFO's vs. USAF—Amazing (But True) Encounters," published on December 10, 1978, by *Parade* magazine, which has a Sunday circulation of tens of millions, even though Satchell claimed to Klass that he did not bother to talk to an experienced skeptic for the same reason he would not talk to a Hynek, a Zechel, or an Acuff. Klass notes that Satchell's article described a rash of UFO reports from October 27 to November 19, 1975, over SAC bases and bases in Canada (all occurring after the NBC-TV movie on the Betty and Barney Hill UFO abduction report was telecast on October 20, 1975) and concluded "What flew over . . . will probably never be fully explained." (See Chaps. 12, 13, and 31.)

- Experienced UFO proponents—such as J. Allen Hynek, Northwestern University; James A. Harder, University of California at Berkeley; Leo Sprinkle, University of Wyoming; and Frank Salisbury, Utah State University—serve on the so-called Blue Ribbon Panel that annually determines the "best case of the year" for the *National Enquirer*, a supermarket tabloid that awards \$5,000 to the original observer(s) of each "best case." Among those selected for the award have been the 1971 Delphos, Kansas, report, the 1973 Ohio helicopter report, the 1975 Travis Walton abduction report, and the 1976 Iranian jet-fighter report. (See Chaps. 14-18.)

- James Lorenzen, co-director of the Tucson-based Aerial Phenomena Re-

search Organization (APRO), withheld the information on a television interview of November 22, 1975, on KOOL-TV in Phoenix, that Walton had failed a secret polygraph test administered by the respected Arizona examiner John J. McCarthy on November 15, 1975, arranged by the *National Enquirer* and APRO. (Although McCarthy mailed the results of the test on November 16, 1975, to the *National Enquirer*, the tabloid announced in July 1976 that the Walton report was determined the "best case of 1975" by the Blue Ribbon Panel, one member of which was James Harder, an APRO investigator present at the November 15 lie-detector session. Lorenzen did not admit to the withheld information until after Klass sent a 17-page white paper in late June 1976 to the *Arizona Republic*, the *Star*, a competitor tabloid of the *Enquirer*, and the heads of Ground Saucer Watch (GSW), the National Investigations Committee of Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), MUFON, and APRO. In a later interview, in the July 23, 1977, *Tucson Daily Citizen*, Lorenzen is quoted as saying: "I believe he [Walton] was transported aboard some sort of craft. No one has come up with an alternative workable hypothesis." (See Chaps. 19-22.)

- The NBC-TV December 15, 1974, production entitled "UFOs--Do You Believe?" provided a vastly greater amount of time to the proponents' viewpoint. ABC-TV's "Good Morning America" and "Good Night America" carried a number of interviews with UFO claimants but did not usually arrange for skeptics to appear. Only CBS-TV has shown restraint and even-handedness in its treatment of UFO issues. (See Chap. 28.)

- Leo Sprinkle, who uses hypnosis in his investigations of abduction reports, acknowledged the validity of the international authority Martin T. Orne's views regarding safeguards for the forensic use of hypnosis published in "The Use and Misuse of Hypnosis in Court" in the *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* (October 1979), but argued that "they were not appropriate for use in UFO cases because there is 'no crime, no criminal, no victim.'" (See Chap. 29.)

- Physicist Bruce Maccabee, head of the Fund for UFO Research in Silver Spring, Maryland, wrote a sympathetic review of the Berlitz-Moore 1980 book about a crashed saucer story. He was the only one of three UFO proponents at a UFO symposium held in Washington, D.C. on September 6, 1980, to admit support for the extraterrestrials-from-crashed-spacecraft hypothesis by saying, "Speaking for myself, I have no direct evidence, but I wouldn't be surprised." (See Chap. 30.)

The conclusion Klass draws from the efforts of those eager to keep the UFO myth alive is best summed up by the title of his final chapter, taken from Louis Pasteur's 1854 warning addressed to scientists: "The greatest derangement of the mind is to believe in something because one wishes it to be so." The conclusion Klass draws about the entire UFO phenomenon is stated in his introduction: "For much too long, the public has been misled by half-truths, by coverup, and by outright falsehoods . . . it is time to talk sense to the public about unidentified flying objects."

I think Philip Klass does indeed "talk sense." As a former field investigator for a pro-UFO group, as a former sympathetic who in the past ten years has gradually become a skeptic on the subject, and as a person who values the scientific method, logical reasoning, and integrity in our society, I can testify to this. Pro-UFO groups are basically self-interest groups; a variety of people are

using them and the myth for profit and for fame; and too many members of the news media do not handle controversial issues responsibly or intelligently. As a result, everyone, including individuals of high competence and integrity, loses credibility, and the public has difficulty in finding a source to turn to that offers complete, reliable, and accurate knowledge on this issue.

Fortunately, the work of one great authority is far more useful to society than the efforts of ten thousand dabblers of mediocrity. While *UFOs—The Public Deceived* does have three or four chapters that could be organized more clearly and five or six paragraphs that contain some humor that a few readers may misinterpret, it is a book of substance and integrity and accurate knowledge that should be placed on the shelf of every library, not only in the United States but in all the countries of the world, alongside the UFO books of the late eminent scientists Donald H. Menzel and Edward U. Condon.

Every citizen in every walk of life ought to read it an re-read it periodically to further their education and to gain an antidote for credulity. •

A Sympathetic Critic's Report

UFOs and Outer-Space Mysteries. By James E. Oberg. The Donning Company Publishers, Norfolk, Va., 1983. 192 pp. \$6.95. Paper.

Reviewed by F. C. Durant III

The subtitle of *UFOs and Outer-Space Mysteries* is *A Sympathetic Skeptic's Report*. I liked that, for it fits the author's personal manner and style of writing. James Oberg is well known to readers of this periodical as a Fellow of CSICOP. He has professional strength in mathematics, computers, the Russian language, and space programs. Oberg is straightforward, firm in exposure of fraud, self-delusion, and misperception; never ascerbic or bitter.

UFOs & Outer-Space Mysteries is a collection of nine essays, all but one of which have appeared in periodicals, including the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.

The book is divided into two parts. The chapters in Part I are titled: "UFOs and the Age of Space"; "Close Encounters—Fact or Fiction"; "The Apollo 11 UFO Incidents"; "Myths and Mysteries of the Moon"; and "The UFO Hoax in Perspective."

"Close Encounters" treats the Pascagoula, Betty Hill, and Travis Walton

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