

# Scope Magazine Article on George Knapp

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## Knapp Time

SCOPE Interview By Scott Dickensheets

Say you're a media pundit, or perhaps a writer of letters to the editor. Your hands idle over the keyboard; whatever hot passion fueled your current project has cooled, and still your copy lacks that zip, that zing you're striving for. As the pilot light of inspiration flickers, you reach for the time-honored solution, so reliable, so zippy, so available on short notice: the George Knapp-UFO joke.

*Has Councilman Smithers joined George Knapp on his intergalactic travels?* you type. Snappy! Or, *Did the extraterrestrials who removed George Knapp's brain with bloodless alien surgery perform the same procedure on Councilman Smithers?*

Not only is it a quick pick-me-up for an anemic paragraph, it's also a little jab in the ribs to a TV guy who could use a little taking down anyway. Best of all, it doesn't have to be situation-specific; you can drop in a quick George Knapp-UFO reference on your way to making almost any point.

Such is Knapp's fate - perpetual punchline. Cracks about his controversial UFO journalism will probably overshadow his accomplishments as a KLAS Channel 8 newsmen. He could win a closet full of Emmys, turn out critically applauded Vegumentaries until Howard Hughes comes home, reign for decades as one of the most popular talking heads on Las Vegas TV, and still, in 2010, some disc jockey will smirk, Gov. Smithers' plans for the I-15 Experience are as far out as George Knapp's alien friends.

Well, don't cry for George. He brought it on himself, and anyway, he's a big guy, he can take it. It's no skin off his beard. "Some of it's kind of amusing," he says during the short walk between the Channel 8 studio and the coffee shop at the Royal Hotel-Casino. He chuckles. He knows that whenever his name is mentioned, there's likely to be a dismissive reference to his UFO work. "Like I haven't already heard that horseshit before," he says.

Things will change, of course, when bulbous-eyed, gray-skinned aliens swoop out of the sky and clamp their otherworldly yoke on the neck of mankind. Ah, what sweet vindication that would be!

It's midafternoon and the Royal's Chung King III restaurant is as empty as alien airspace (see how easy it is!). We're here because Knapp's temporary cubicle in the Channel 8 newsroom is crammed with the debris of life in daily journalism. Also because the place is packed with nosy journalists who might perk an ear outside his cubicle, the way Knapp used to do near Ned Day's. "I don't want the rest of the newsroom to hear me pontificate," he snorts.

He doesn't have to worry about that at the Chung King. The lunch crumbs have long been brushed from the deep blue tablecloths, and it's too early for the dinner crowd. We have the place to ourselves.

Good thing, probably. The last thing I want right now is a fellow diner to approach Knapp, bury his face in a cloth napkin, and between sobs confess that curious Alpha

Centurians once shoved a probe up his ass. Hey, it happens - the spontaneous confessing, that is. Whatever skepticism his fellow journalists have toward Knapp's E.T. complex, it's apparently not shared by a lot of the public. "Everytime I go to the grocery store, I'm stopped by two or three people...who want to tell me their UFO stories. And everybody has one."

Not everyone; the strangest thing I've ever seen is Tony Orlando perspiring. But there are apparently a lot of people out there who have closely encountered something, and seeing Knapp loitering on the vegetable aisle is just the thing to prompt them to unburden themselves. The steady public response is one of the things that encourages his interest in the UFO story.

Thing is, there's more to Knapp than the alien angle. He's a key member of Channel 8's bulldogging I-Team investigative unit, and he sticks it to movers, shakers and deal makers in his weekly "Street Talk" segment. Over the years he's accumulated a few trophies - a commentary Emmy for "Street Talk," a United Press International award for his UFO work. His series on the life and death of his journalism mentor, Ned Day, took second place in an Associated Press contest - behind Day's seminal "Mob on the Run" documentary. ( "Here he's dead, and he's still laughing at me," Knapp says.)

The viewership seems to dig him, too; "The station's studies show that viewers like to see me in that give-'em-hell role," he says. In fact, that's why he's no longer anchoring, he says; that aggressive demeanor is at odds with the bland Walter Cronkiter that Americans demand of their news anchors, the one Gary Waddell has down pat. Knapp's viewer-approval quotient is one reason Channel 8 took him back full-time in March of '95, after his much publicized three year detour from journalism into the ranks of public relations.

"When George left, he was one of the highest-rated anchors in the city," News Director Emily Neilson said upon rehiring him last March. "He remains, to this day, one of the top three or four anchors in the valley."

Except for the TV hair, Knapp doesn't look like your typical news mannequin. He's fleshy, and if he works on a StairMaster, it has yet to give him buns of steel. He knows it, joking about his "svelte physique." He also possesses local TV's most distinctive facial hair, possibly excepting Dave Courvosier's girly mustache. That he looks natural on camera is just one of the mysteries of television. With his sardonic sense of humor, his occasional reckless use of a pun and his HeyMac delivery, Knapp comes off as a well-rounded character in an industry where people rarely seem more than one pixel deep.

Knapp, Neilson once said, isn't "one of those Ken-and Barbie-doll anchors who zoom in and out of town. That's not what Channel 8 is about."

"I have the nearly perfect job," he says, sipping coffee. "I have almost total freedom; the station seems to trust me. It's almost carte blanche, and a reporter can't ask for more than that." Why the trust on the station's part? Knapp shrugs. "I've been around a long time, I haven't burned them in any serious way, and I have done some good stories."

He counts his UFO stuff in that category.

Knapp is no sap; he knows a lot of this UFO business is nonsense; most of it, probably. Too much involves get-a-life types poring monk-like over government documents, nose twitching for a whiff of cover-up in the slightest typographical anomaly or shift in bureaucratic tone. There's frantic imagining, fantasy projection, unfulfilled longing, zealous belief, outright crackpottery. And yet...

"Ninety percent of it is complete nonsense," he says. "Maybe 95 percent. But there's a core of information there that no one can explain and that's what I'm interested in pursuing."

All business, then. Except that sometimes Knapp seems a little too into it to suit some people, as if his sense of journalistic mission has merged a little too neatly with some innate "Chariots of the Gods" impulse. Down that road lies the Weekly World News. Or, he might point out, a scoop of major proportions. It could be that Knapp is in the position of, say, a pre-Copernican journalist reporting on the heretical notion that the Earth swings around the sun. "If there's anything to it, [contact with an extraterrestrial life form] would be the most important development in human history." Bigger than Watergate, bigger than OJ, bigger than history itself.

Nor, he suggests, is it really all that farfetched in an age when university tenured physicists and theoretical mathematicians are wrangling with time travel, alternative universes and parallel dimensions.

As it is, he says, dealing with the question of alien visitation means dealing with Big Questions central to human existence: "Who are we? Where do we fit into the big picture?" Of course, it also deals with questions of a less philosophically acute nature, such as, Why do aliens always seem to appear in Dead Possum, La.t (The obvious answer - that aliens are simply interplanetary rednecks drawn to rural areas by the strum of "Dueling Banjos" - doesn't seem to have been widely taken up in UFO circles).

Knapp started reporting on UFOs because Ned Day wouldn't. "John Lear [a prominent UFO researcher] came in to see Ned. Lear had been a key source for Ned in breaking the stealth fighter story, so at the time he had some credibility. He had this stack of documents [about UFOs and the government]. Ned wanted no part of it...

Knapp, however, loitering within earshot, offered to take a look at the papers.

He was intrigued. A few weeks later he had Lear guest on "On the Record," a little-watched public-affairs interview show. "And the phones started ringing, and I started getting letters. It obviously touched a public pulse." That led to a series on UFO matters in the mid-'80s (repackaged as a two-hour special titled "Best Evidence"), followed shortly by a second series.

And that's how George Knapp got into UFO journalism - it was an open door and he happened to wander in. He must not have seen the Do Not Enter sign that has kept away the rest of mainstream journalists. "I almost gave it no thought at all," he says. He is asked all the time whether he actually believes this stuff. His standard response goes something like this: "It's not a religion. I believe it's a good news story. There is a core of information there that's intriguing and potentially important."

And - pinch him! - he's got the beat to himself. "There's no other serious journalist working on it; I'm the only one."

Which makes him an easy target.

"I've taken some grief," he says. What must it be like to flip open the paper over your Eggos and coffee and see an editorial cartoon of yourself chasing UFOs with a butterfly net, as *Review-Journal* penman Jim Day once depicted him? Actually, Knapp thought that one was pretty funny. Same goes for another Day effort, in which an alien hit squad mistakes a gas pump for Knapp.

"The only people I see it's affected are my fellow journalists," he says. "The public can't seem to get enough. I know - I get the calls everyday. I open the letters."

Not that there haven't been a few setbacks. An ambitious series of UFO documentaries failed to come to fruition. And one of his most striking sources, an engineer named Bob Lazar - who claimed to have worked on alien ships for the

government - was partially discredited when he couldn't prove his educational background and was charged with pandering. Still, Knapp persists, news eyes trained on the horizon, dismissing any regrets with a bright "I've had a lot of fun."

"He's well respected in the UFO community," says Glenn Campbell, a government watchdog who specializes in Area 51, the supersecret government installation 130 miles northwest of Las Vegas. It's considered by some UFOlogists and people gooned on The X-Files as the place where the government keeps captured or recovered spacecraft.

"He's given the field a lot of respect. He's gone way out on a limb, and that takes a lot of courage. He deserves a lot of credit for taking an unpopular stand."

Some handy George Knapp biographical details.

Childhood: Born in New Jersey, Knapp grew up in Northern California. "We moved around a lot," he says. "My childhood was happy but not particularly stable."

Coming to Las Vegas: In 1979, Knapp was a debate coach at the University of California, Berkeley when a bartender told him, "You'd be good on TV; I know someone in TV in Las Vegas." So Knapp took a chance. Turned out the contact was a cameraman at KLVX Channel 10, not exactly a power position. Knapp eventually wormed his way into a position hosting news programs. A year later he was hired at Channel 8.

It's not just the UFO business that arches eyebrows among journalism people when it comes to Knapp. It's also that he's taken a side. Journalists are supposed to aspire to absolute neutrality, to be human Switzerlands; we don't take sides, we take notes. But here was Knapp, in 1991, abruptly leaving Channel 8, along with fellow anchor Bryan Gresh, to work for Altamira Communications, a PR outfit that counted among its clients groups favoring a nuclear dump at Yucca Mountain. Declaring an interest.

And now, after three years in Altamira's flack shack, he's back at Channel 8 and we're supposed to just forget that he backed the pro-nuke line, that he worked on campaigns for Altamira's political clients? Trust him not to be working some hidden agenda?

That's asking a lot from journalists, who tend to believe that once you've been pickled you can never be a cucumber again.

Knapp himself looks on the whole interlude as an educational experience, simultaneously acknowledging and dismissing whatever reservations colleagues may have. Anyway, the viewing public doesn't draw such hard lines; they still love him. Most of his time with Altamira - "about 90 percent," he says - was spent pursuing the UFO documentaries under the auspices of Altamira Broadcasting, a subsidiary company that hoped to market the videotapes to what they imagined was a vast and waiting public. That was, um, a miscalculation. "It just didn't work," he says. Even though he went - at not inconsiderable expense - to Russia to secure UFO records from the former Soviet defense ministry, it wasn't enough to keep the project from crashing after three completed documentaries.

"I've got seven or eight more ready," he says, "including one in which I went to England for the crop circles, still in the can."

Compared to his UFO work, working on political campaigns for Altamira must have seemed really weird. That's a universe populated by some truly alien life forms.

Among his efforts was William "Doc" Pearson's losing bid to retain his seat on the Clark County Commission in 1992 (Yvonne Atkinson Gates eventually won). It was a nasty affair, and it opened Knapp's eyes.

"Journalists like to think we know what's going on," he says, leaning back against the booth. "Well, we don't see everything that goes on." Smoky back rooms! Cutting

deals! Digging dirt! Plotting hit ads! "I learned a lot," he says. "But I would be less than honest if I said I wasn't concerned about being perceived as a turncoat."

While pro-nuke flackery was a relatively small part of his job at Altamira, it's perhaps the sharpest petard on which local commentators like to hoist him. For instance, he traded barbs with Las Vegas SUN Publisher Brian Greenspun (for whom, I should note in the interest of full disclosure, I work) and columnist Jeff German over whether some of Knapp's "Street Talk" commentaries masked a hidden political agenda. News Director Neilson says Knapp's PR past hasn't tainted him. "We are very concerned about that," she says. The station has established guidelines restricting Knapp from reporting on issues - primarily Yucca Mountain - connected to his Altamira days. "We're probably more concerned about that than the viewers, and I think that's good."

Not one for regrets, Knapp doesn't think of his detour from journalism in negative terms. He came back to the TV trenches with a better idea of how the gears in this city work, and with a renewed focus.

"My batteries are definitely charged up," he says. And the respite from the scramble-down-the-hallway, videotape-in-hand pace of TV news "probably added a year or two to my life." And some perspective. He places a greater value on time at home with himself - he's never married, has no kids - reading mostly; he's one of the seven or eight people who still subscribe to Spy, and gets National Geographic magazines as well. "I read all the time," he says. "I read at red lights."

Which doesn't mean he overdoes the leisure time. "I'm still a workaholic. I don't really have any hobbies." Perhaps the closest thing he has to a hobby is his annual ritual of taking some Jack Daniels and 7-Up to Ned Day's grave on Day's birthday. It's a humorous yet oddly poignant practice, and perhaps a necessary tribute to the legendary newsman.

"He was my mentor, and one of my closest friends," Knapp says. "He groomed me. I don't think a day goes by that his name doesn't come up or that I don't think about him. It's really amazing how often his name comes up." There's a discernible similarity between Day and Knapp, the inevitable result of working closely. But don't try to anoint Knapp as any Ned Redux. "There is only one Ned; those are shoes that will never be filled."

Then he pauses, grins, and recalls something Day used to tell him: "All the way to the top - on my back!"

It's a few ticks before 5:30pm on a recent Thursday. Channel 8's afternoon newscast swings back from a commercial break. "Street Talk" time. There's Knapp, posed before a bank of TV screens, the word COMMENTARY prominent beneath his bearded chin. In quick order he dishes a little dirt from city hall, summarizes someone's legislative lobbying strategy, handicaps a political contest. This is pure eau de Knapp - knowing, insidery, sardonic. You realize, as he does, that he's in his element here. Try picturing him swinging this schtick somewhere else. Can't do it.

"I've had plenty of job offers," he says. "But I'm not sure my appeal would play anywhere else." Anyway, Vegas was built for him. It's a happening news town, with moguls, losers, dreamers, corruption, a Star Trek-ian variety of strange creatures. "I love it here," he says.

He wraps this "Street Talk" with a cutesy item about a vanity plate reading MOFO, spotted by KLAS anchorwoman Paula Francis. "Some of you are probably wondering how the DMV let something like this through," he says. "And others are wondering, 'How did that nice Paula Francis pick up on something like that?'" He grins as the camera cuts away. It's Knapp time, all right.

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