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PROSAIC EXPLANATIONS: THE FAILURE OF UFO SKEPTICISM

by Bruce Maccabee, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Could some UFO sightings actually be manifestations of Other
Intelligences
(OIs) or Non-Human Intelligences (NHIs) such as
extraterrestrials (ETs),
visiting the earth and interacting with human beings? Or are
all reports of
such sightings simply mistakes, hoaxes, or dreams of the
hopeful believers?
It all comes down to explanation. If there were no sightings
which are richly
detailed, credible and yet unexplainable, the UFO subject would
be based
totally on "will o' the wisp"-like, indistinct observations, or
on
theoretical expectations, as is the so-called Search for
Extraterrestrial
Intelligence (SETI, based on the theory that we could detect
electromagnetic
waves radiated toward us, intentionally or unintentionally, by

extraterrestrial civilizations).

If all the richly detailed sighting reports had reasonable explanations, then theoretical speculations about ET intelligences visiting the earth might be interesting but of little practical consequence. Ufology, if there were such a thing in the absence of unexplainable sightings, would consist of studying witnesses who, evidently, failed to identify explainable (identifiable) phenomena or who simply made up "tall stories" about ET visitation. "Ufological science," if it existed under these circumstances, would consist of psychology, psychiatry and perhaps sociology.

There are skeptics who believe that this is exactly what should constitute ufology.

Noted UFO skeptic Philip J. Klass has provided perhaps the most straightforward statement of the skeptic's position on UFO sightings in his book "UFOs: the Public Deceived" (Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1983, pg. 297), wherein he writes that the "Occam's Razor" alternative to unexplained UFO sightings, is this: "...roughly 98% of sightings are simply misidentifications of prosaic, if sometimes unfamiliar, objects by honest persons... (and) ... the balance, roughly 2%, are self-delusions or hoaxes by persons who like to spin tall tales and become instant celebrities."

In other words, UFO reports are the results of misidentifications, delusions, and hoaxes, period! More recently he has indicated that in his thirty or so years of investigation he has found not one case for which he could find no "prosaic explanation". As evidence of this, Mr. Klass has offered prosaic explanations for a number of famous sightings. Of course, Mr. Klass has not attempted to explain each of the hundreds of thousands of sighting reports which have been made over the last half century. However, he has proposed

explanations for a representative sample of reports which are classified as "good" by most ufologists and, on this basis, he has generalized his statement to apply to the bulk of the UFO sighting reports.

Klass would have the reader believe that he has correctly explained all the sightings he has investigated. If he were correct then his argument about misidentifications, hoaxes, and delusions making up 100% of UFO sightings would be unassailable, at least for the sightings which he has investigated. However, in some cases he has offered prosaic explanations which are demonstrably wrong. In other cases he has proposed explanations which may not be provably wrong but which are are, at the very least, weak and unconvincing.

To say that at least some of Klass' prosaic explanations are wrong is a strong statement. However, an even stronger statement can be made: Klass' analysis has demonstrated that at least some of the cases he has investigated have no prosaic explanations. Why is this? Because Klass, having analyzed these cases carefully, has proposed the only potential explanations that remain after all other explanations have been rejected. That is, there are no other potential prosaic explanations that make any sense. Hence, when his proposed explanations are proven wrong, there are no remaining candidate explanations and the sighting becomes that of a TRUE UFO (TRUFO), which might be evidence of OI/NHI/ET.

THE CASE OF THE DAMAGED POLICE CAR

[An] example of a case for which Klass' proposed prosaic explanation is wrong, or, at best, unconvincing, is the rather traumatic experience of police officer Val Johnson of Warren, Minnesota. (See "UFOs: the Public Deceived", page 223).

Shortly after 1:30 a.m., August 27, 1980, as he was cruising the countryside in his police car in an area of low population, Johnson noticed a bright light that he could see through the trees of a small wooded area. Thinking it might be a landed airplane carrying illegal drugs from Canada, he accelerated along a road toward the area of the light. Suddenly this light moved rapidly toward his car. He heard a noise of breaking glass and lost consciousness. When he regained consciousness, he was leaning forward with his head against the top of the steering wheel. There was a red mark on his forehead which suggests that he might have bumped his head on the wheel hard enough to render him unconscious (he said he was not wearing his seatbelt at the time). After regaining consciousness, he called the police station. It was 2:19 a.m.; he had been unconscious for about 40 minutes. He reported that something had "attacked" his car.

When another officer arrived on the scene a few minutes after Johnson's report, he found Johnson's car nearly 90 degrees to the road (blocking the road) and skid marks nearly 100 ft long. Johnson was found in a distraught condition, in a state of shock. He said he recalled seeing the bright light rushing toward his police car and he recalled hearing breaking glass. The next thing he recalled was realizing he was sitting with his head on the steering wheel. He did not recall skidding to a stop. He complained about pain in his eyes and was taken to a doctor who could find no eye damage. He did not complain of a headache.

Of particular importance is damage to the police car. One of the two glass headlight covers on the driver's side had been broken; there was a large crack in the windshield on the driver's side; a plastic cover on the light bar on top of the car had a hole in it; there was a dent in the top of the

hood, and two of the three spring-mounted antennas were bent 60 or more degrees. Also, the electric clock in the car and Johnson's mechanical wristwatch both read fourteen minutes slow, although Johnson was certain he had set both before he had begun his nightly patrol.

The damage to the car was physical evidence that something strange had taken place. Careful studies of the damage were made by the police department and by scientists working with the Center for UFO Studies. They could find no evidence or reason to believe that Johnson had damaged his own car. They could find no prosaic explanation for the sighting.

Klass also investigated the sighting. He spoke to several people who knew Johnson and asked about his interest in UFOs. According to his friends, he seemed no more interested in UFOs than in numerous other subjects. They could provide no reason to believe he would intentionally damage his car to create a UFO incident. He might "hide your coffee cup," one gentleman told Klass, but "as far as we know, he's never told any untruths."

Klass concluded his discussion of the Officer Johnson UFO sighting by offering two alternatives. He wrote:

"The hard physical evidence leaves only two possible explanations for this case. One is that Johnson's car was attacked by malicious UFOnavts, who reached out and hit one headlight with a hammerlike device, then hit the hood and windshield, then very gently bent the two radio antennas, being careful not to break them, then reached inside the patrol car to set back the hands of the watch on Johnson's arm and the clock on the car's dashboard. These UFOnavts would then have taken off Johnsons' glasses, aimed an intense ultraviolet light into his eyes, and replaced his glasses, while being careful not to shine ultraviolet on his face.

"Or the incident is a hoax. There are simply no other possible explanations."

Klass' amusing version of the "UFO/ET hypothesis" should not detract from the importance of his statement that, "There are simply no other possible explanations." In other words, if it was not a hoax, then there is no prosaic explanation for this sighting. Perhaps Klass realized that the hoax hypothesis was unconvincing at best and intentionally tried to make the UFO alternative seem silly.

The police department did not accuse officer Johnson of damaging the police car. Yet, Klass' book, published about 3 years after the incident, clearly implies that this event had to be a hoax. Several years after the publication of the book, I challenged Klass to send a letter to the police chief of Warren, Minnesota, along with a copy of his book chapter, so that the police chief would realize that he should charge Johnson with damaging the car. So far as I know, Johnson has never been charged with damaging the police car.

UFO IN THE SNAKE RIVER CANYON

Klass is not the first to offer prosaic explanations. Dr. J. Allen Hynek, who in his later years became a strong proponent of UFO investigation, began his "UFO career" in 1948 as a strong skeptic/debunker. His explanations of a number of UFO sightings helped to set the tone of governmental UFO investigation in the early years.

One of his most unconvincing explanations was that offered for the sighting by Mr. A. C. Urie and his two sons on August 13, 1947. They lived in the Snake River Canyon at Twin Falls, Idaho. According to the FBI investigative report of this case, at about 1:00 p.m. Mr. Urie "sent his boys to the (Salmon) river to get some rope from his boat. When he thought they were

overdue he went outside to his tool shed to look for them. He noticed them about 300 feet away looking in the sky and he glanced up to see what he called the flying disc."

This strange object was flying at high speed along the canyon, which is about 400 feet deep and 1,200 feet across at that point. It was about seventy-five feet above the floor of the canyon (and so more than 300 feet below the edge of the canyon) and moving up and down as it flew. It seemed to be following the contours of the hilly ground beneath it. Urie, who said he was at about the same level as the UFO, so that he had a side view, estimated it was about twenty feet long, ten feet wide and ten feet high, with what appeared to be exhaust ports on the sides. It was almost hat shaped with a flat bottom and a dome on top. Its pale blue color made Urie think that it would be very difficult to see against the sky, although he had no trouble seeing it silhouetted against the opposite wall of the canyon. On each side there was a tubular shaped fiery glow, like some sort of exhaust. He said that when it went over trees, they didn't sway back and forth, but rather the treetops twisted around, which suggests that the air under the object was being swirled into a vortex. He and his sons had an excellent view of the object for a few seconds before it disappeared over the trees about a mile away. He thought it was going 1,000 miles an hour.

Hynek offered the following "prosaic explanation," which became part of the official Air Force record on the sighting: an atmospheric eddy. Why this explanation? The object appeared pale bluish in color, like the sky, and the trees were moving around as if a swirling wind went over them. Hynek explained the blue color as a "reflection" of the blue sky in the hypothetical atmospheric eddy. He offered no explanation of how this eddy

could appear to have the strange "hat" shape, be traveling at about 1,000 miles per hour, how there could be a fiery glow at one location on the side of the "eddy" or why the eddy would appear as a solid rather than transparent object.

An eddy is a density inhomogeneity in the atmosphere which, in principle, might bend light by a very small fraction of a degree. However, for Hynek's explanation to work, the light would have to be bent five degrees or more, far beyond anything the atmosphere could do. Even Hynek realized this and repudiated his explanation years later (see The Hynek UFO Report, Dell Pub. co, NY, 1977).

KENNETH ARNOLD'S SIGHTING

The June 24, 1947 sighting by private pilot Kenneth Arnold attracted worldwide interest. It also attracted many more than its share of explanations. One of the scientists with an excessive urge to explain was Dr. Howard Menzel. In his first book, "Flying Saucers" (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1953), Menzel offered a blanket explanation for sightings that occurred within the first five years of modern UFO sightings (1947-1952): misidentified atmospheric phenomena including the effects of the atmosphere on sunlight, unusual clouds caused by particular wind patterns, and mirage effects (light ray bending in the atmosphere). He suggested several different atmospheric and cloud effects to account for Kenneth Arnold's sighting. In later books ("The World of Flying Saucers", Menzel and Boyd, Doubleday and Co., 1963; "The UFO Enigma, The Definitive Explanation of the UFO Phenomenon", Menzel and Taves, Doubleday and Co., 1977) he offered other explanations.

Mr. Arnold, a businessman and private pilot with over 4,000 hours of flying

experience, reported seeing nine semicircular, thin (compared to the length), shiny objects in a line flying southward past the western flank of Mt.

Rainier [and that] "swerved in and out" of a chain of mountain peaks south of

Rainier. The objects were therefore about 20 miles east of him (he was about

20 miles west and 10 miles south of Mt. Rainier and flying almost due east at

the time). He timed their flight from Rainier southward to Mt. Adams, a

distance of about 50 miles. They crossed this distance in 102 seconds. Hence,

the direct interpretation of Arnold's sighting is that these objects were

traveling at about 1,700 mph. (This was about four months before Yaeger

exceeded the speed of sound in a test aircraft in October, 1947). In

reporting the speed calculation, Arnold arbitrarily reduced the speed

considerably to account for possible errors in his measurements. He publicly

stated that the objects were traveling at about 1,200 mph.

Arnold reported

that he first noticed the objects as they repeatedly flashed or reflected the

bright afternoon sunlight like a mirror when they were north of Mt. Rainier

and last saw them (by their flashes) as they passed Mt. Adams.

The total

sighting duration was two and a half to three minutes.

Dr. Hynek was the first scientist to try to explain Arnold's sighting. Hynek

used some details of the observation and an assumption about Arnold's visual

acuity to calculate an approximate size of the objects. He obtained a large

size (two thousand feet long, one hundred feet thick). He could not accept

this size as reasonable, so he decided to ignore Arnold's claim that the

objects went in and out of the mountain peaks south of Mt.

Rainier. By

ignoring this statement (essentially implying Arnold had made a mistake in

the observation) Hynek was able to assume that the objects were much closer.

Hynek decided that Arnold saw large airplanes and he then estimated that the

distance was only about six miles. This shorter distance reduced the calculated speed to about 400 mph. Since this speed was within the capability of military aircraft, Hynek identified the objects as "aircraft," thereby also ignoring Arnold's description of the objects.

Recent analysis of the Arnold sighting shows that Hynek made an incorrect assumption about Arnold's visual acuity. Had he made the correct assumption, he would have obtained a much smaller size (under 100 feet long and 10 or so feet thick) and then, perhaps, would not have rejected Arnold's distance estimate, in which case he would have had to accept the speed estimate. Had he accepted the speed estimate, the history of the UFO subject might have been different.

Hynek's work was done secretly for the Air Force in 1948 under "Project Sign"(1948). About four years later, Dr. Menzel tackled Arnold's sighting. In his first book "Flying Saucers" Menzel summarized the sighting, then criticized the Air Force for accepting Hynek's explanation and went on to propose a much more "obvious" solution. Menzel wrote, "(Arnold) clocked the speed at about 1,200 miles an hour, although this figure seems inconsistent with the length of time that he estimated them to be in view. From his previous statement, they could scarcely have traveled more than 25 miles during the three minutes that he watched. This gives about 500 miles an hour, which is still a figure large enough to be startling." Note that Menzel did not tell the reader that Arnold had timed the flight of the objects between two points. Instead, Menzel invented a travel distance of twenty-five miles, and implied that this distance was covered in three minutes (180 seconds). Hence he was able to assign a much lower, although "startling," speed of 500 mph.

Menzel went on to "solve" the mystery of Arnold's sighting:
"Although what
Arnold saw has remained a mystery until this day (1953), I
simply cannot
understand why the simplest and most obvious explanation of all
has been
overlooked... the association of the saucers with the hogback
(of the
mountain range south of Mt. Rainier)... serves to fix their
distance and
approximate size and roughly confirms Arnold's estimate of the
speed." (Note
that Menzel, unlike Hynek, accepted Arnold's distance
estimate). Menzel then
went on to suggest that Arnold saw "billowing blasts of snow,
ballooning up
from the tops of the ridges" caused by highly turbulent air
along the
mountain range. According to Menzel, "These rapidly shifting,
tilting clouds
of snow would reflect the sun like a mirror... and the rocking
surfaces would
make the chain sweep along something like a wave, with only a
momentary
reflection from crest to crest."

This first explanation by a scientist with the reputation of
Dr. Menzel may
seem slightly convincing, but only until one realizes that (a)
blowing clouds
of snow cannot reflect light rays from the sun (60 deg
elevation angle) into
a horizontal direction toward Arnold's airplane and thereby
create the very
bright flashes that Arnold reported; (b) there are no 1,200 mph
or even 500
mph winds on the surface of the earth to transport clouds of
snow --
fortunately!; (c) there are no winds that would carry clouds of
snow all the
way from Mt. Rainier to Mt. Adams (Arnold saw the objects pass
Mt. Adams
before they were lost to his view); (d) about 10 minutes before
the sighting,
Arnold flew rather close to the south flank of Mt. Rainier while
heading
westward in order to search for a downed marine transport
plane. Then, only a
few minutes after the sighting, he flew eastward along a path
that took him a
dozen miles south of Mt. Rainier; during each of these flights
(west, then

east) his plane would have been strongly buffeted by such high winds, but he reported, instead, very calm conditions.

In case the first explanation wasn't sufficiently convincing, Menzel offered "another possibility": he suggested that perhaps there was a thin layer of fog, haze or dust just above or just below Arnold's altitude which was caused to move violently by air circulation and which reflected the sunlight. Menzel claimed that such layers can "reflect the sun in almost mirror fashion" [but] offered no substantiation for this claim.

Ten years after his first book, Dr. Menzel offered his third, fourth and fifth explanations in his second book, "The World of Flying Saucers": mountain top mirages, "orographic clouds" and "wave clouds in motion." In his third and last UFO book, "The UFO Enigma, The Definitive Explanation of the UFO Phenomenon", written in the early 1970's just before Menzel died, he again discussed Arnold's sighting and offered his sixth (and last) explanation: Arnold saw water drops on the window of his aircraft.

The "bottom line" is that neither Hynek nor Menzel proposed reasonable explanations for Arnold's sighting.

CONCLUSION

The problem faced by the skeptics is that there are sightings for which the generally accepted (by skeptics!) prosaic explanations are wrong or at least unconvincing. If UFOs were "ordinary science," the proposed explanations would have been rigorously analyzed, and probably rejected, rather than simply accepted. Scientific ufology needs skeptics, but skeptics who are capable of recognizing when a sighting simply cannot be explained by any prosaic explanation.

B. Maccabee, 2000

