REPORT ON A SURVEY OF THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE AMERICAN ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY CONCERNING THE UFO PHENOMENON

SUMMARY

Refereed journals, to which scientists turn for their reliable information, carry virtually no information on the UFO problem. Does this imply that scientists have no views and no thoughts on the subject, or that all scientists consider it insignificant? Does it imply that scientists have no reports to submit comparable with UFO reports published in newspapers and popular books? The purpose of this survey is to answer these questions.

Of 2,611 questionnaires mailed to members of the American Astronomical Society, 1,356 were returned, 34 anonymously. Only two members offered to waive anonymity. These facts and many comments confirm that the UFO problem is a sensitive issue for most scientists. Nevertheless, only a few (13) respondents made critical remarks about the subject or the survey; 50 made encouraging statements, 34 offered to help, and 7 indicated that they are actively studying the problem.

Each respondent was asked to state his opinion on whether the UFO problem deserves scientific study: 23% replied "certainly", 30% "probably", 27% "possibly", 17% "probably not", and 3% "certainly not", which represents a positive attitude among 53% of the respondents, as against a negative attitude among 20%. Analysis of the returns shows that older scientists are markedly more negative to the problem than are younger scientists. One also finds that opinions correlate strongly with time spent reading about the subject. The fraction of respondents who think that the subject certainly or probably deserves scientific study rises from 29%, among those who have spent less than one hour, to 68% among those who have spent more than 365 hours in such reading. It appears that popular books and publications by established scientists

exert a positive influence on scientists' opinions, whereas newspaper and magazine articles exert negligible influence.

Respondents were asked to express their views on possible causes of UFO reports by assigning "prior probabilities" to four "conventional" causes [(a) a hoax, (b) a familiar phenomenon or device, (c) an unfamiliar natural phenomenon, and (d) an unfamiliar terrestrial device] and four "unconventional" causes [(e) an unknown natural phenomenon, (f) an alien device, (g) some specifiable other cause, and (h) some unspecifiable other cause]. There was a very wide spread of opinions on this issue. Averaging all returns gives the values: (a) .12, (b) .22, (c) .23, (d) .21, (e) .09, (f) .03, (g) .07. This average response is therefore quite open-minded, although many individual responses are not. Older people tend to give more credence to the possibility of a hoax and less to unconventional possibilities. By contrast, those who have studied the subject extensively attach less weight to the possibility of a hoax and greater weight to the unconventional possibilities.

Over 80% of respondents expressed a willingness to contribute to the resolution of the UFO problem if they could see a way to do so but, of those expressing this interest, only 13% could see a way. This is a notable consensus which may encapsulate the dilemma which this problem presents to scientists. Those who have studied the subject are more willing to help and more likely to see a way to help.

Most respondents consider that meteorology, psychology, astronomy/astrophysics and physics have relevance to the UFO problem and some consider that aeronautical engineering and sociology may also be relevant. Most respondents (75%) would like to obtain more information on the subject, but they express a strong preference for getting it from scientific journals rather than from books or lectures.

The returns identified 62 respondents who had witnessed or obtained an instrumental record of an event which they could not identify and which they thought might be related to the UFO phenomenon. The total number of events reported was larger (65) since some respondents reported more than one event. In addition, ten _identified_ strange observations were mentioned, four investigations were described (including one detailed study of ground traces), and attention was drawn to a few strange events described in the scientific literature. It was found that these 62 respondents have spent longer than average studying the UFO problem, that they are more positive in their assessment of the scientific importance of the problem, and that they tend to be more open-minded about unconventional explanations. Only 18 (about 30%) of these respondents indicated that they had previously reported their observations; seven to the Air Force, Navy or NORAD, one to the police, two to airport authorities, seven to other scientists, and one to a newspaper.

Sixty-three percent (63%) of those reporting events were night-sky observers, as against 50% of respondents who did not report events. Thirty-six (36) of the events comprised lights seen in the sky at night. Twelve (12) were of point lights which were more or less puzzling; four (4) were of formations of lights; and four (4) were of diffuse lights. Three respondents independently described what appeared to be a searchlight playing on a cloud when there were no clouds in the sky. Four described disk-like objects, and five described objects with different shapes. Three cases concerned objects which appeared to emit smaller objects or "sparks." One case described apparent interference with an automobile electrical system (as did also a daylight case).

There were sixteen accounts of strange objects seen by day. Five were

of small objects, seven were of disk-shaped objects, and four described other miscellaneous observations.

Seven respondents described photographic records of strange phenomena, and three were kind enough to provide me with copies of the photographs or film. (With help, I was able to make plausible interpretations of two of these.) One respondent recalled a radar observation he had made, another described two strange radio records, and a third described puzzling records obtained by a satellite tracking station.

This study leads to the following answers to the questions initially posed. To judge from this survey of the membership of the American Astronomical Society, it appears that:

(a) scientists have thoughts and views but no answers concerning the UFO problem;

(b) Although there is no consensus, more scientists are of the opinion that the problem certainly or probably deserves scientific study than are of the opinion that it certainly or probably does not;

and (c) a small fraction (of order 5%) are likely to report varied and puzzling observations, not unlike so-called "UFO reports" made by the general public. As is the case with reports from the public, many may be unusual observations of familiar objects, but some seem to be definitely strange.

These results are consistent with the findings of an earlier but more limited survey of members of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Sturrock, 1974b), except that the opinions of astronomers (expressed in 1975) concerning the significance of the UFO problem were more positive than were the views of aeronautical engineers (expressed in 1973).