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One of the saucers
the Condon Report
could not explain:
sighted over
McMinnville, Oregon
on May 11, 1950

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| COVER STORY | The Condon Report—Fact or Fiction? Millions of Americans, long concerned over the puzzling and often startling accounts of unidentified flying objects, welcomed the news that a thorough study of the phenomena would be conducted by a committee of scientists headed by the widely respected Dr. Edward Condon of the University of Colorado. But the Committee Report, released by the National Academy of Sciences after its review, seems to further compound the confusion over UFOs. Writer Lloyd Mallan finds that there are several dissenting viewpoints. | 38 |
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More on UFOs! Some hard reportorial digging uncovers what may be the most astounding sighting of all—that by American astronauts during the Gemini 11 flight. Conflicting theories from NASA and Norad, along with the eyewitness reports of the space pioneers who saw and photographed the weird object in outer space, add up to an important story you won't want to miss! Read all the details in the June issue of SCIENCE & MECHANICS—on sale at your newsstand April 24.

One of the UFOs that the Report could not explain was this disc-shaped object observed over an Oregon farm in 1950.

By Lloyd Mallan

THE CONDON REPORT FACT

The University of Colorado's study of Unidentified Flying Objects, made with U.S. Air Force funds, is not the final word on the subject, since it leaves unanswered many very serious scientific questions

□ On January 9 of this year, a carefully guarded document was released to the American press by the National Academy of Sciences. For months before its release, the 1,485-page document had aroused provocative speculation among leading members of the scientific community. The document represented two years of intensive study at a cost of half a million dollars on the subject of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs). The purpose of the study was to prove or disprove once and for all the existence of flying saucers. Its results had been kept secret since the middle of last November when it was turned over to a special panel of 11 prominent scientists appointed by the National Academy to evaluate its scientific credibility.

The apparent reason for secrecy was that

both the University of Colorado, which made the study under the directorship of Dr. Edward U. Condon with U.S. Air Force funds, and the National Academy wanted the Academy's special panel to consider objectively all aspects of the study and give their final judgment on it before making it public. But the real underlying reason may well be that neither the University nor Dr. Condon wanted their highly regarded reputations tarnished by being individually involved with a "kooky" subject, as many scientists refer to flying saucers. In fact, I have been told that Dr. Condon originally refused to undertake the UFO study—unless the National Academy agreed to review it upon completion and certify it for scientific purity. With the blessings of the Academy

FICTION?

upon it, few scientists would dare openly to criticize what is now the famous Condon dismissal of UFOs as a subject for serious scientific study.

But I have been able to find those few scientists who are willing to be openly critical of the Condon Report. One of these men, a physicist like Dr. Condon, doesn't want to be named. He told me: "The thing is that Condon's having involved the Academy now makes it a very difficult, delicate matter to refute the Report in any way. You can't publicly deliver a rebuttal to the press. You are now, if you are a recognized scientist, as I am, forced to give your rebuttal in a 'scientific' context. And to do that would be next to impossible, since you would be fighting the Establishment alone.

"By the way, I want to make one point very clear. I do not see any attempt at conspiracy between Condon and the Academy to whitewash his UFO Report. Actually, the Air Force had to twist his arm to get him to take on the study. I just see closed minds operating on both sides."

However, two scientists *were* willing to be named. One had been a member of Dr. Condon's UFO team from the beginning—until about a year ago. He is Dr. David R. Saunders of the Department of Psychology at the University of Colorado. Here's his attitude about the Condon Report and the Academy's special panel of scientists who evaluated it: "It reminds me of Danny Kaye's old story about the oboe. It's an ill wind that nobody blows good. I don't think

“. . . the Report is not a diligent examination of some of the best UFO cases”

that the Academy really wanted to review the Report in the first place. I think that they only agreed to take on the job because of the kind of pressure that Dr. Condon could bring to bear upon Dr. Frederick Seitz, President of the National Academy and a former student of Condon's.

“My feelings about the Academy's special panel is that its members were thrust into an impossible situation. They had only the Report itself to look at—and they only had a limited time to do that. Even though there were eleven of them, they certainly did not represent all of the areas of scientific specialization that should have been represented in order properly to evaluate the validity of the work. This is no criticism of them as individuals or professionals, but here I must draw an analogy between their situation and a situation in medicine where doctors might be charged with malpractice.

“Nevertheless,” Dr. Saunders told me, “one gets the feeling that the Academy panel has even gone beyond the Report in some of their statements—which is kind of eerie.

“Another thing that bothers me very much,” he went on, “is that the press has exceedingly overplayed Condon's recommendations. In the Report proper those recommendations are actually more carefully hedged than the press has been leading the American public to believe. And what I'm afraid of is this: that when people begin to read the Report after it's published, they'll begin to think that it's not really as extreme as it has been made to sound. Then it's going to come up smelling better than it should. It will seem more credible. And this will be bad for any serious future scientific research into the UFO phenomena—because the Report does contain some rather fundamental flaws. These have been missed by the press and the public will miss them too—because of the press.”

And what are these flaws? Dr. Saunders puts it this way: “My basic impression is that there is a disparity between the parts of the Report that Dr. Condon has contributed himself and the rest of that massive Report. Basically, I get the feeling that there are some very substantial UFO cases dealt with in that Report which were ignored when it was summarized. And it was Condon who wrote the summary and the rec-

ommendations.”

What were these recommendations? Stories about the Report in the newspapers and through other news media made it appear that Dr. Condon recommended that everybody forget about flying saucers and find more profitable scientific pursuits. One of the specific recommendations was that school children be discouraged from an interest in UFOs and, if their interest persisted, their teachers should withhold their class credits on any work they may do related to UFOs. This is a rather strong recommendation. But Dr. Condon's reasoning is that UFOs are fantasy, not science, and treating them as serious classwork would corrupt a student's intellectual development. One of the other specific suggestions in the Report is that the Air Force discontinue its famed Project Blue Book, which is the only official government organization in the world investigating flying saucer reports. It has been in existence for more than 20 years and has in its files well over 11,000 case histories of UFO sightings. Of these, only about five percent remain in the “unidentified” category.

But it's that five percent that bugs Dr. James E. McDonald of the Institute of Atmospheric Physics at the University of Arizona. He also asserts that many puzzling UFO cases throughout the world have never been submitted to Project Blue Book.

During a half-hour telephone interview with Dr. McDonald, he concisely reviewed for me Dr. Condon's summary and recommendations in the UFO Report, along with his criticisms of it: “The main point I'd make,” he began, “is that the actual contents of the Report failed to support the principal conclusions that Dr. Condon reaches. (On this point he sees eye-to-eye with Dr. Saunders.) The principal conclusions center around the suggestion that there is nothing of scientific value warranting any further attention, in any systematic sense, on the part of the federal government. The contents of the Report include a significant number of unexplained UFO cases of such an interesting nature that to argue against further attention to the problem is really quite—quite surprising.”

I interjected: But didn't Dr. Condon admit this himself and say that given enough time

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Condon Report

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to investigate those cases more thoroughly they could probably be explained on reasonable terms?

"Yes," Dr. McDonald admitted. "He states that. But since he has *not* explained them and since he has had at his disposal half a million dollars to do so and also since there are large numbers of similar unexplained cases that he hasn't confronted at all, that old ploy—familiar to anyone who's followed Project Blue Book's statements on the problem—is quite unsatisfactory."

Dr. McDonald continues: "My study of the Report, up to the present, indicates that the actual contents by no means warrant the negative conclusions that Condon has stressed. And the press has now picked up those conclusions." Here, again, Dr. McDonald concurs with Dr. Saunders. But he also disagrees mildly with the Colorado scientist: "Actually, in fairness to Condon and in fairness to the state of the problem, it's disappointing that virtually no reporters gave any attention to the proviso that Dr. Condon has written into the concluding chapter of the Report, that proviso being that there are still certain unsettled problems of atmospheric physics and radar propagation through the atmosphere—and these *do* warrant support by existing scientific agencies because they're intertwined with reports of unidentified flying phenomena.

"But nobody in any editorial of the press—and I've read about fifteen such editorials so far—or in any news story based upon the Report—including Walter Sullivan's stories in *The New York Times*—has made note of or stressed this important proviso at all. And I think that it's an anchor to windward that Condon has placed in his Report because, scientist that he is, he is aware that there are some really puzzling elements to the UFO problem. Everybody seems to be forgetting that it was his scientific instincts that caused him to include this proviso in the Report.

"The proviso is actually discussed at some length, but the difficulty with its positive stand is that it is sandwiched in between such emphatically negative points, the rest of the whole chapter is so negative, that it seems to have been lost on most writers."

In agreement with this was Dr. J. Allen Hynek, who for some 20 years has been scientific consultant to Project Blue Book.

Dr. Hynek, who heads the Department of Astronomy at Northwestern University and also is Director of the Dearborn Observatory, did not want to comment prematurely on the Condon Report. But he did tell me one thing: "It seems to me that if you *really* read Dr. Condon's recommendations carefully, you'll find that they're not as hide-bound as the newspaper reports make them out to be. And that, I think, is something that should be emphasized."

The Report also stated that believers in UFOs as well as UFO-sighting reports are of special interest to "the social scientist and communications specialist." Additionally, the Report includes this sentence: "Scientists with adequate training and credentials who do come up with a clearly defined, specific proposal (for the study of the UFO phenomena) should be supported." In other words, Dr. Condon's study does not rule out future scientific investigation of the problem—provided that a recognized scientist or group of scientists can present an effective scientific case for their investigation.

Yet obviously, Dr. Condon himself does not feel this would be possible. For in the Report he writes: "Our general conclusion is that nothing has come from the study of UFOs in the past 21 years that has added to scientific knowledge. Further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby."

Is this a healthy scientific attitude? I asked Dr. McDonald what his thoughts were on this question. "No," he said. "No, I don't believe it is. But here I'd rather be quoted in *Science & Mechanics* as speaking for myself alone. Materially, I think the Report is not an open-minded analysis of the case. I don't think it's a good thing. I think it's a mixed bag. It has many sections that are done in a workmanlike fashion that are kind of unrelated to the crucial questions that the Condon Committee was asked to consider. In a half-dozen well-done chapters there is no reference to UFOs at all. These chapters discuss the scientific purpose of releasing various kinds of balloons into the atmosphere, the optics of mirages, radar-propagation anomalies and so forth. If you wanted to be carping about it, you could say that these chapters are 'padding' because, although they are interesting and informative, they don't contribute a thing to the main subject of UFOs. They do contribute to a saleable book, since they contain good ref-

erence material—but that's all.

"But as far as the overall Report is concerned," Dr. McDonald summarized his attitude, "where it should really count, I wouldn't use the words 'healthy' or 'unhealthy,' I would say that it's a very slim and spotty sample of UFO cases—it contains a total of 59 cases and many of these are rather poorly chosen cases. I simply feel that the Report is not a diligent examination of some of the best UFO cases on record."

Dr. McDonald cited a few cases that were left unexplained in the Report and should have, he thinks, received more attention. One of these involved the UFOs observed by many persons at Lakenheath Air Base in England sometime during 1956. Ground radar operators noted several blips that appeared to be moving at speeds between 2,000 and 4,000 miles an hour. They made right-angle turns at slower speeds of a few hundred miles an hour. Visual observers saw round white objects that shifted direction rapidly. Two Royal Air Force fighters were scrambled to intercept the objects. One of the pilots reported that he had locked on to a UFO with both his airborne radar and his radar gunsight. But immediately afterward, the UFO appeared to whiz around behind his tail. It remained there until he ran out of fuel and was forced to land. He had tried all kinds of evasive maneuvers without being able to shake the UFO.

About this case, the Report stated: "Although conventional or natural explanations cannot be ruled out, the probability of such seems low in this case."

Another "good" unexplained incident was listed as Case 46 in the Report. It included photos made on May 11, 1950 at a farm near McMinnville, Oregon. While feeding rabbits, the farmer's wife looked up and saw a disc-shaped object "sort of gliding" through the sky. She summoned her husband who brought a camera and made two pictures of the object. They saw no exhaust-flame come from the object. The rabbits quietly went about their feeding. They were not disturbed by the phenomenon.

The farmer and his wife said that the UFO was "brightly metallic, silver or aluminum colored, with a touch of bronze and seemed to have a sort of superstructure." They were neither alarmed nor excited by the incident, but simply returned to their work. In fact, they did not even have the

film developed until they had finished exposing the entire roll the following Mother's Day.

They sought no publicity. In fact, a local newspaperman later got the story from others who knew the farmers. When he came out to interview them, he found the negatives of the UFO "on the floor under a davenport, where the witnesses' children had been playing with them." The farmer was so casual about the whole thing that he did not even step down from his tractor while being interviewed by an investigator from the Condon Project.

On this case, the Condon Report concludes: "This is one of the few UFO reports in which all factors investigated—geometric, psychological and physical—appear to be consistent with the assertion that an extraordinary flying object, silvery, metallic, disc-shaped, tens of meters in diameter, and evidently artificial, flew within sight of two witnesses. It cannot be said that the evidence positively rules out a fabrication, although there are some physical factors, such as the accuracy of certain photometric measures of the original negatives, which argue against fabrication.

William K. Hartmann of the University of Arizona did most of the detective work on photographic cases. Some 35 photographic cases were analyzed and most of them were either probable or possible fakes. Seven were of natural phenomena unknown to the picture-taker. A dozen were too vague for precise analysis. In fact, Dr. Condon called the McMinnville photos "too fuzzy" for effective analysis. Yet it is a tribute to his scientific integrity that he included Hartmann's analytical results in the Report.

A UFO sighting that occurred more recently and also puzzled the University of Colorado's investigating team involved the Approach Control Radar at Colorado Springs Airport—right in Condon's backyard, so to speak. On May 13, 1967, the ACR controllers noted a UFO trailing a Braniff flight into the runway. As the aircraft landed, the UFO blip on the radar-scope swung to the right and passed over the airport some 200 feet in altitude. Nobody in the control tower (which is visual, not radar) could see anything unusual. Nor could the crewmen aboard a Continental Airlines flight only three or four miles behind the Braniff flight see anything following that flight in the sky. The Report concludes this case with: "This must remain as one of

the most puzzling radar cases on record and no conclusion is possible at this time."

Gordon D. Thayer, who performed the radar as well as the optical analysis for the Condon project, made that statement. He also analyzed the Lakenheath case described earlier. That one, he concluded, was "the most puzzling and unusual case in the radar-visual files (of the Condon Project). The apparently rational, intelligent behavior of the (Lakenheath) UFO suggests a mechanical device of unknown origin as the most probable explanation of this sighting."

Nevertheless, after studying the Condon Report, the 11-member special panel of the National Academy of Sciences came to this conclusion: "The Report recognizes that there remain UFO sightings that are not easily explained. The Report does suggest, however, so many reasonable and possible directions in which an explanation may eventually be found, that there seems to be no reason to attribute them to an extraterrestrial source without evidence that is much more convincing."

The final sentence of the Academy's panel-report on the Report is significant: "On the basis of present knowledge, the least likely explanation of UFOs is the hypothesis of extraterrestrial visitations by intelligent beings."

And to this, Dr. Saunders answers: "If we're going to talk about extraterrestrial intelligence in any sense, we've got to specify just what we *do* mean by that—in *specific* terms. I am now going to apply the same kind of reasoning as Condon's: failing to support the extraterrestrial hypothesis according to one particular definition really doesn't say anything about whether we could not have supported it according to another definition. So if this is a valid form of reasoning, it can be used to prove things either way." He paused to make his point: "But if it can be used in either direction with so much ease—it's probably not really a valid form of reasoning."

And so what do you now think about flying saucers? Yes, there *may* be? No, they don't exist? ■

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