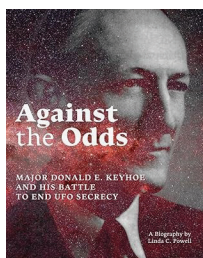


**BOOK AND
MULTIMEDIA
REVIEW**

Against the Odds: Major Donald E. Keyhoe and His Battle to End UFO Secrecy

Mark O'Connell

oc.oconnell@gmail.com



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The history of encounters with strange craft appearing in our skies can be organized according to the names we have given these apparitions over the years. In 1947, when a private pilot spied a string of silvery “saucers” flying past him, a reporter dubbed them “flying saucers.” It didn’t take long for that term to be officially tossed aside by the Army Air Forces in 1947 and replaced by the more technical and more respectable term “Unidentified Flying Objects.” This term stuck around until recent decades, when semi-professional UFO chasers took it upon themselves to come up with a new, more inclusive name for Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon, or UAPs.

In *Against the Odds*, Linda Powell tells the story of little-known UFO researcher Donald E. Keyhoe, a man whose influence extended to every one of these phases of the UFO saga. From the moment pilot Kenneth Arnold sighted a chain of flying saucers wending their way around the Cascade Mountains of the Pacific Northwest, Keyhoe’s journey of discovery was inevitable. In Powell’s telling, Keyhoe’s embryonic interest in the flying saucer phenomenon was triggered in no small part by the Arnold sighting and the resulting media frenzy.

Keyhoe was no stranger to publicity. In 1927, as a young Marine Corps naval pilot with an injury that ended his active duty, Keyhoe was chosen to accompany aviation superstar Charles Lindberg on a cross-country barnstorming tour meant to introduce America to the possibilities of commercial aviation. Keyhoe served as Lindbergh’s advance man, flying ahead to the next stop on the itinerary and making preparations with local officials to prepare for the hero’s arrival. As this story was new to me, I dove into Powell’s impeccably detailed research and found my interest in Keyhoe’s fascinating career growing with every page.

To me, one of the distinguishing features of Powell’s reporting is that she pays almost as much attention to minor, peripheral characters as she does to the principals. In so doing, she creates a vivid narrative that makes the read an ongoing pleasure.

A few words about Powell’s research. She has gathered together an amazing mountain of information on Keyhoe’s career, and she knows how to use that research to tell a gripping, engaging story. I can speak from experience of the difficulties and challenges of writing about events—in this case, UFO events—that have been written about and picked apart over and over again for decades. It’s not easy coming up with a new slant on an old tale, but Powell manages to dramatize the most famous, most intriguing UFO cases Keyhoe studied with a freshness and immediacy that few other UFO journalists have been able to capture.

When I began writing about the UFO phenomenon several years ago, I quickly realized that I could split UFO books into two major groups. First were the books written by UFO researchers and devotees; their books were vastly spectacular and entertain-



ing but clearly not written by professional writers, and so sometimes came off as confusing or tedious. Second were the books written by professional journalists who set out to write “serious,” “no-nonsense” examinations of the phenomenon, but because they were so concerned with being taken seriously, they ended up draining the UFO experience from its bizarre, wacky, absurd energy (which is, I believe, what attracts many of us to the phenomenon in the first place). Those books all have their own unique value, but the best UFO books I found were the ones—like those written by my favorites, John Keel and John Fuller—that took the best features of those two approaches and blended them into captivating, sometimes terrifying, but always serious, unflinching narratives. Keyhoe recognized this early on, and so has Powell.

Throughout the 1950s, UFOs were making headlines around the country and around the world, Keyhoe was a successful writer of both fiction and non-fiction, with bylines in numerous national publications. Because so much of his writing dealt with topics related to aviation, he was a natural choice to author a major story about UFOs in a well-known national magazine. When *True*, a popular monthly for men, decided to run a serious, no-nonsense story about the phenomenon, they turned to Keyhoe, who, at that time, Powell points out, was a UFO agnostic.

That quickly changed, and with a meteoric impact. When Keyhoe's blockbuster story appeared in *True* it caused a national uproar and swelled the ranks of UFO “believers.” *True* sold so many copies that month that a publisher commissioned Keyhoe to expand his article into a book. Keyhoe's book, titled *Flying Saucers Are Real*, quickly sold 500,000 copies, and determined the trajectory of his career.

And here's where Powell's narrative really takes flight, if you'll pardon the pun. Now a nationally recognized UFO expert—the first of his kind, really—Keyhoe found that he was entering a strange new reality, one that Powell depicts with impressive precision. As he delved into the strange world of flying saucers, Keyhoe started to experience a strong and bewildering resistance—even hostility—from his former commanders and colleagues in the military. To Keyhoe, there could be only one explanation for the strong headwinds he was encountering: the military must be hiding something!

Keyhoe couldn't have known at the time, but his newfound interest in UFOs soon gave birth to a dizzying array of belief systems and conspiracy theories, some of

which he spawned himself.

In 1950, Keyhoe founded the National Investigation Committee for Aerial Phenomenon, or NICAP, to do what the Air Force wouldn't, or couldn't do: investigate and explain the UFOs. As Powell portrays it, the founding of NICAP was a perfectly inevitable result of Keyhoe's growing suspicions that the government was holding back evidence, and that the UFOs were extraterrestrial in nature.

Powell's history of NICAP is a real tour de force, as she documents the ups and downs of the organization, the rivalries and schisms, and the clashing personalities that seem to be an endlessly repeating feature of almost every UFO organization. Powell masterfully weaves the story together with generous excerpts from the letters and documents of Keyhoe and his NICAP colleagues, who all shared the goal of bringing UFOs out of the shadows but often differed on the best way to accomplish this. In addition to internal tensions, NICAP was also bedeviled by a competing UFO research group called the Aerial Phenomenon Research Organization, or APRO, a sometime friend and sometime foe of NICAP, a rivalry that Powell recounts in excruciating detail.

NICAP's efforts were further complicated by the emergence of the “Contactees,” a community of seemingly ordinary people who wrote books and gave speeches about befriending aliens who would take them on voyages to distant planets and share cosmic wisdom with them. Powell's account of NICAP's struggles to draw public attention away from the Contactees is quite astonishing, and I found myself chuckling more than once at Keyhoe's frustrating attempts to keep NICAP above the fray.

As if those struggles weren't enough, Powell goes into great detail documenting NICAP's seemingly endless cashflow crises. Despite NICAP's lofty stature in the world of UFO research, membership seemed to be in perpetual decline, as revenues dried up and little progress seemed to be made in solving the UFO mystery.

If all of this sounds familiar, it may be because the field of UFO research today often seems to be in shambles, rife with competing factions and modern-day Contactee equivalents emerging to cloud the issues and discredit each other. After reading Powell's book, I have new hope that it doesn't always have to be this way. Donald Keyhoe may not have solved the UFO mystery in its entirety, but in Powell's telling, he led us all one step closer to understanding the mysteries of the cosmos, and he showed us the power of struggling *Against The Odds*.