

## BOOK REVIEW

**UFOs and Government: A Historical Inquiry** by Michael Swords and Robert Powell. San Antonio, TX: Anomalist Books, 2012. 580 pp. ISBN 978-1933665580.

*UFOs and Government: A Historical Inquiry* is a result of a major undertaking by a group of veteran UFO researchers who called themselves The UFO History Group. They dedicated themselves to developing new information about the U.S. Government-analyzed UFO reports, and they present a UFO history with new documentation obtained from the Air Force Files along with interviews with many of the participants. Although the book concentrates on the United States, it also contains histories of UFO research in Australia, France, Belgium, Spain, and Sweden, along with short pieces on Belgium, the Soviet Union, and Brazil. Michael Swords, an emeritus professor of natural science at Western Michigan University, headed up the team. The UFO researchers were Robert Powell, who helped with the writing and edited the book, and Barry Greenwood, Richard Thieme, and Jan Aldrich who served as consultants and contributing writers. The international chapters were written by William Chalker, Vincente-Juan Ballester Olmos, Clas Svahn, and Powell. Robert Purcell supplied the book with copious photographs, charts, and images of documents. Most of the book is written in a conversational style, making it accessible to both beginners and serious UFO researchers.

The history team's main focus is on how the United States addressed and dealt with the UFO phenomenon from the 1940s until 2007. The book is meticulous in providing fact-based analyses of the military and governmental investigators and scientists in the United States who developed the academic and governmental perspective on the subject that would influence generations. The reader will not find grand conspiracy theories and darkly hidden secrets that have fascinated UFO researchers for decades. Rather, this is a heavily documented history revealing exactly what happened and, whenever possible, why.

The world has been living with the UFO phenomenon since the appearance of the balls of light and metallic objects that pilots called foo-fighters in World War II and the oddly flying Swedish "ghost rockets" in 1946. When the media began to report the modern wave of UFO sightings in June 1947, it attracted the attention of the armed services. The U.S.

government, thinking that the objects might be secret weapons from somewhere, organized several projects to investigate the UFO phenomenon: The first was Project Sign, which began in 1948 and ended in 1949; and the second was Project Grudge, which began in 1949 and was renamed Project Blue Book in 1951; Blue Book was terminated in 1969.

In the beginning, members of the Project Sign team were sincere in their attempt to identify the odd objects that private citizens, military personnel, and radar installation workers were seeing in the atmosphere. Because Project Sign was a military operation, the main objective was to determine whether the objects were a threat to the national security of the U.S. regardless of their origin. When it was determined they were not a threat but yet remained unidentifiable, the Project Sign team was split on how to explain them. Some Sign members thought the objects were misidentifications, weather phenomena, and other forms of normal human misperceptions or natural phenomena. Others held open the idea that the objects appeared to be artificially constructed and under intelligent control because of their non-wing shapes, movements, and speed characteristics. With the Soviet Union ruled out as the origin of the objects (after being in contention as secret weapons in these early years), and if they were not psychologically based, some Project Sign team members thought they might be “real” and profoundly strange. As such, Project Sign was divided into two groups: one that bent the evidence to conform to their own conventional predilections (the objects as misidentifications and weather phenomena); and the other that confronted the evidence squarely and understood the objects to be unusual and requiring more scientific study. A few Sign members even thought that the extraterrestrial hypotheses—that the objects came from outside Earth—was viable.

With the advent of Project Grudge in 1949, the debate within Project Sign was settled. The group that emerged as the winner consisted of those who apparently did not particularly care what the evidence was; this was the group that considered the objects to be basically identifiable—if not now then eventually. The implication of this thinking was that the objects were simply a human mistake or mental construct that would fade away. Yet the UFOs stubbornly refused to disappear, and more high-level military observers along with pilots and scientists reported seeing these objects, adding to the mounting evidence for the phenomenon’s anomalousness. Regardless, instead of sending the study of the phenomenon to the scientific community, the Air Force held onto it and dug in its collective heels.

In 1951 Project Grudge became Project Blue Book, headed by Air Force Captain Edward Ruppelt with a staff of ten people. Blue Book dealt with an extraordinarily large wave of sightings in 1952, and Ruppelt seemed to

be level-headed in leading the staff's investigation of the sightings. Several scientists offered their services, such as Harvard astronomer Donald Menzel and UCLA physicist Joseph Kaplan. Their stance was that they knew the solution to the problem—UFOs were caused by planes, birds, mirages, misidentification of other natural phenomena, hoaxers, psychologically disturbed people, and so forth. These explanations applied to many sightings but not to all. Since the advent of UFO reports, a group of cases stubbornly resisted identification. In 1953 the CIA became a player in the UFO game and convened a panel to look into the UFO matter and decide once and for all whether the objects could be a threat to national security.

Known as the Robertson Panel for its chair, mathematical physicist Howard P. Robertson, this CIA-sponsored group found that all the sighting reports could be accounted for as long as a possibility existed that they might be something other than extraterrestrial. Consistent with CIA thinking, it also found that the **reports**—not the UFOs—could be a threat to national security because they often clogged the normal channels of military communication, potentially causing a dangerous situation in the event of a Soviet air attack on the U.S. To address this situation, the Robertson Panel recommended that the Air Force and the U.S. government conduct a campaign to convince the public that there was nothing to UFOs. The panel recommended the use of celebrities, television, cartoons, movies, and other similar methods for this public relations effort. If successful, presumably this campaign would dramatically decrease the number of reports. *UFOs and Government: A Historical Inquiry* demonstrates that from 1953 to 1969, implementing the Robertson Panel's recommendations became a driving force behind the Air Force's response to UFO sightings. The public relations campaign effectively prevented any serious UFO investigations. Project Blue Book was left to wither away to just a few staff members and then finally to be disbanded.

When reading the material one is immediately impressed by the wealth of documentation in *UFOs and Government*. From the foo-fighters on, each chapter presents new revelations about the infighting between the members of the government-sponsored projects as they tried not only to wrestle with the contents of the reports but also to fulfill the requirements of assessing possible threats to the national security. In these endeavors, most Air Force personnel come across as either incompetent or simply dishonest. This portrayal is based not on the authors' imaginations but on the rich documentation describing their attitudes and quality of mind. The heroes are a small number of serious scientists and military men who were puzzled by UFOs and wanted science brought to bear on the reports. But the government was ill-equipped to understand what was happening and/or

incapable of dealing with the evidence in any scientific way. As a result, the potential importance of the UFO phenomenon went unrecognized.

One of the book's strongest attributes is the detail with which the history group presents virtually everything of note during the thirty-one years that the government contended with the obstinate phenomenon. As I read the new documentation, I vacillated between being appalled, enraged, and depressed at the lack of mental acuity displayed by many of the staff members within Sign, Grudge, Blue Book, and the CIA.

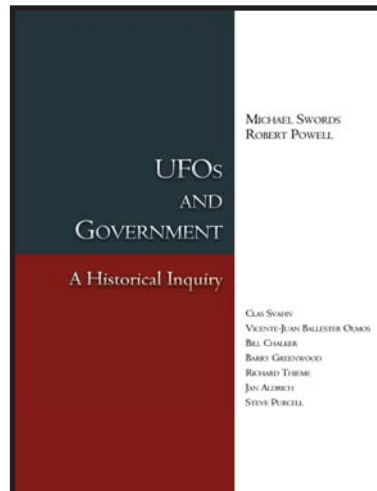
Simply put, the U.S. Air Force and government personnel reasoned that the objects could not possibly be of extraterrestrial origin and therefore were not. A scientific study of the phenomenon was not part of their thinking. In fact, the idea that UFOs were unworthy of scientific investigation became endemic in official offices. This way of thinking allowed Air Force investigators to cavalierly assume that the people who reported these objects were wrong, that the radar sightings were misinterpreted, that groups of people watching a formation of bizarrely maneuvering UFOs were all mistaken, and so forth.

In the 1960s, a few bold scientists and Air Force personnel—notably University of Arizona atmospheric physicist James McDonald and Northwestern University astronomer J. Allen Hynek, who had been the Air Force's scientific consultant on UFOs since 1948—tried unsuccessfully to modify the Air Force's stance and add some corrective science to its pronouncements. But McDonald met a courteous stone wall and Hynek was virtually ostracized within Project Blue Book. A sighting report determined to be “unknown” became a dead-end explanation, which the Air Force, and consequently the U.S. government, used to support their conclusion that the case was unworthy of attention rather than being the starting point of research. Thus, the outside scientific community, having misguided faith in the Air Force's pronouncements, had little reason to study the subject.

Swords and Powell reveal that the U.S. government's intransigence in the face of disconfirming evidence was the rule and not the exception. The infighting, the presumptions, the bad decisions, and the shallowness of many of the operatives within the projects made serious research impossible. Against this backdrop, Swords and Powell add myriad excellent and sometimes breathtaking contemporary case histories from Air Force files to demonstrate there was something to study just when its minions were saying there was no “there” there.

Projects Sign, Grudge, and Blue Book all came to the conclusion that UFOs were not a threat to the national security (a speculative assertion) and none seriously studied the UFO phenomenon. Ultimately, they all wound up serving public relations rather than science.

By 1966, the Air Force, under intense public criticism for not doing enough about the UFO phenomenon and reported sightings, determined that UFOs were more of a public relations headache than they were worth. Searching for support to minimize interest in UFOs, the Air Force authorized an “independent” study of the subject at the University of Colorado under the leadership of physicist Edward U. Condon. At its start the Air Force strongly urged Condon to come to a conclusion with which it would agree.



The book sheds light on the extreme rancor and infighting in the Condon Committee, which ultimately tore it to shreds. Condon comes off as a bully who would have his way no matter the facts. In the end he got his way after most of the original committee members were fired or resigned. The December 1968 Condon Committee’s recommendations (written by Condon without input from other members of the committee) concluded that there was nothing to UFOs whatsoever. The implication was that the Air Force should close down Project Blue Book. In an eerie throwback to early Air Force pronouncements, Condon’s recommendations did not reflect the project’s actual findings, and at the time researchers wondered whether he had actually read the report. Project Blue Book closed in 1969. Since then the Air Force has refused to investigate civilian UFO sightings.

Swords and Powell bring us up to date with discussions of how the local government handled the 2008 Stephenville, Texas, sightings, the federal government’s response to the Roswell mystery, and the March 1, 1997, Phoenix, Arizona, sightings, among others. In the Phoenix case, Governor Fife Symington publicly made fun of the sightings. In 2007 he admitted that on that evening he witnessed a huge triangular object making no noise flying at a low level. He was unable to identify it.

Although the United States failed to make sense of and scientifically address UFO sightings, a few other countries took a different route. Sweden occupies a unique place in UFO history with its “ghost rockets”; these objects were seen in the mid-1940s before the massive 1947 UFO wave. *UFOs and Government* develops new information about these early puzzling sighting events. Australia and Spain basically followed the American style

of searching for convenient answers no matter how much they diverged from the facts, but France and Belgium had very different histories. France took the most scientific path, setting up organizations run by scientists and then reporting their findings to the government and later to the public. In response to a massive wave of sightings in 1989–1990, Belgium also set up a UFO group that investigated these extraordinary sightings by military and governmental personnel. Brazil, Spain, and the Soviet Union had official UFO investigations and the short chapter sections about them give us a glimpse into their programs.

In 1968 James McDonald reflected about the U.S. government's confrontation with the UFO phenomenon. He wondered whether the government was involved with a cover-up or a foul-up. *UFOs and Government* greatly clarifies what happened—there was a continuing cover-up of the raw information and this cover-up resulted in a monumental foul-up of the investigation.

*UFOs and Government: A Historical Inquiry* is an important book for all who are interested in the U.S. government's interface with the UFO phenomenon. It is filled with revelations, insights, documents, and new facts that provide a great depth of knowledge about the critical early days of governmental UFO policy that set the tone for the entire history of official investigations into the phenomenon. The book is an essential tool for all interested in UFOs and UFO history.

**DAVID M. JACOBS**