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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Is Consensus a Good Thing in Science?

Henry Bauer's well-written Essay Review (in this issue) on "climate change" brings to mind another attempt to close off debate and pronounce that "Yup, now we know for sure": The Condon Report on UFOs of 1968 (Condon et al. 1969). This was an attempt, on the part of the U.S. Air Force, to discourage interest in UFOs, and to make the issue appear finally resolved. Carried out by the University of Colorado, the project, under the direction of Edward Condon, conducted a number of investigations of UFOs. The Air Force used the resulting report as evidence that UFO research was a waste of time. For five years after its publication, they mostly got away with it. A post-publication review by the National Academy of Sciences had endorsed the Report. The Air Force was able to close Project Bluebook, reporting was discouraged, and what reports were made within the Air Force stayed in highly classified channels. It was a well-orchestrated piece of flim-flammery, and it certainly appeared to be good science, but it wasn't good science (Sturrock 1999, Hall 2001). In spite of the lengthy text of the book (about 1,000 pages), the Report managed to obscure rather than inform.

How this was done is interesting. First, the manager of the project, Edward U. Condon, from the first day, could barely contain his opinion that it was all hooey. He regularly diverted attention from the most serious and interesting cases toward those that were sensational and ridiculous. Second, even though after investigation 30% of the cases remained unexplained, this finding was not emphasized, but rather the casual reader was led to believe that with a little more information these cases too would yield to commonplace explanations. This is unlikely. Third, the report insisted that science had not been advanced by studying UFOs, and that further study was not worth pursuing. Events have demonstrated the reverse (Guerin 2000). Fourth, the report argued that UFOs did not present a threat to national security, and this was and is unequivocally false.

Astronomers and other experts picked apart the report, and were able to demonstrate many of its problems. The 30% figure I used above was developed by a committee of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Sturrock 1999). This committee was highly critical of the Condon Report, but the national media had already bought Condon's conclusions.

The real problem was that the sponsor of the project, the Air Force, had picked a university that was a tame lion, and that could be expected to deliver a negative report, essentially explaining it all away through social science (Saunders & Harkins 1968). But the larger problem was that the Air Force withheld absolutely key data from the project. These data had been gathered through a series of close encounters between the Air Force and the UFO phenomena.

Among the earliest events was the UFO crash at Roswell Air Force Base in 1947. Initially announced as the crash of a "flying disc" by the base commander, the crash was the next day explained away as the fall of a weather balloon. The base commander knew that this was not true. The wreckage was certainly not a weather balloon, and that explanation did not even cover the metal remains found on a field near the Brazel ranch. The debris, samples of which ended up in the car trunk of Jesse Marcel, the base intellligence officer, had some remarkable properties. These included, for some pieces, a stunning ability to return to their shape after being bent. A "memory metal." Interestingly enough, although Marcel showed the samples to his family, they were returned to the Air Force and never seen afterward. But they were not part of a weather balloon. Moreover, the Brazel ranch debris field was only one of the three crash locations (Carey & Schmitt 2009, Bourdais 2009). The others apparently held the fuselage and the occupants. But the other locations did not become known for decades, except to the Air Force clean-up committee. And then there was a truly strange phenomenon. Many people involved in this event, who knew anything about it in Roswell, were threatened with death, not only for themselves but for their entire family. Meanwhile, the physical evidence was removed and taken somewhere else. So much for the "weather balloon" explanation. On his deathbed, General Blanchard, one of the high officials at Roswell, wrote out a testimony that exposed the hoax the Air Force had played (Bourdais 2009).

However, we know the threats to witnesses were taken very seriously. In the reports of SAC base incursions (see below), virtually all the witnesses waited to report until after they left the Air Force. By contrast, at Roswell, a large percentage of the eyewitness evidence was reported only on someone's *deathbed*. Witnesses had been scared.

The threats intrigued me, since my father, Edgar Westrum, Jr., worked on the Manhattan Project, pursuing the isolation of plutonium metal at Chicago. Although he discussed his war work with me on several occasions, and although my mother too was involved, no one was threatened with death. In fact, a well-illustrated article on the whole effort appeared in *Life Magazine* shortly after the war (Goro 1946). Whatever happened at Roswell,

it would appear, was much more secret than the atomic bomb. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that after Roswell, there were many more crashes (Wood 2005).[1] In each crash, something would fall out of the sky, then soldiers would appear, cordon off an area, and cart away the debris to somewhere else. So *somewhere else*, there may be a lot of UFO evidence.

But the crashes are only one part of the physical evidence. The other major part is the interaction between UFOs and the atomic weapons programs of the United States. Notably, there have been a number of instances where UFOs flew over Strategic Air Command facilities, sowing havoc and even causing malfunction of the stored nuclear weapons. In some cases, the missiles went "off line" and were unable to be launched. In another case, the launch sequence was triggered, and required a manual shut-down to abort a launch. I gather that the Russians have similar problems with UFOs and their own bases (Hastings 2008).

To give some numbers to these interactions, I asked Robert Hastings to give me some idea of the extent of the "UFOs and Nukes" contacts. He indicated that he had interviewed some 157 people in the course of his research on this, and that his files bore good evidence of some 87 incidents that involved nuclear missiles. In 11 of these cases, the missiles had been deactivated. In 6 of the cases, the launch sequence had been initiated. There were bombers involved in 14 of the cases, of which 2 included adverse effects to the weapons.[2] In some of these cases, there was the usual muting of the witnesses: "Nothing happened. You didn't experience anything. And don't talk about it."

Only one of these events has been investigated in the kind of detail that the Condon Report should have involved, namely the Minot, North Dakota, UFO Event of 24 October 1968, by Tom Tulien of the Sign Oral History Project. This was a very complex event that had several distinct parts. The Sign Project has done 30 interviews, including some with the pilots of an airborne B-52 bomber. While a capsule description of the event is included in the Condon Report, the incompetence of the Air Force investigation of this case by Project Bluebook is shocking. The Bluebook investigators did not even have the Top Secret clearances necessary to interview the pilots. For instance, among the events that took place on 24 October was a low-level flyover of a B-52 bomber of an ostensibly landed UFO. This object was so bright the pilots described it as a "miniature sun." When they got closer, they found it was an articulated lenticular object, with lights, seemingly at least 200 feet long. This was explained as "ball lightning!" (Tulien). This explanation is obviously ridiculous. There was no storm at the time. We also have another lengthy personal account of a similar "close encounter" at Malmstrom (SAC) Air Force Base in 1967 (Salas & Klotz 2004). And

further witnesses to UFO/SAC base sightings are still constantly coming forward, especially after their retirement, according to author Robert Hastings. Obviously one cannot get more involved with "national security" than events involving the bases of the Strategic Air Command! The Strategic Air Command was very interested in the Minot 1968 case, and repeatedly pressed them for information (Tulien).

Yet the Air Force's ostensible "conclusion" that there was nothing valuable in the UFO phenomenon also, like the climate change argument, is based on more than simply scientific research. There were and are a lot of "backstage" activities going on. "Scientific" conclusions by committees reflect such maneuvering. Anyone who has been on many government committees tends to recognize some basic facts of life:

1) Those put on the committee usually shape the conclusion. Scientists' points of view and assessments of particular subjects are often known. This was a factor both in the choice of the University of Colorado to do the study and the choice of individuals who went into the later review panel of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The NAS panel was apparently handpicked by Condon's former co-author of the *Handbook of Physics*, Hugh Odishaw. At least this is what Odishaw told his colleague Richard Greenwell at Colorado.

2) The amount of time spent on the committee is seldom sufficient to change an already strong opinion. This can allow writing the conclusion before the panel has even met. There is strong evidence that this was the case with Condon. And the committee often does little "research" besides reading the literature. The Condon project was an exception. It actually had time to do fundamental research. Yet even the full conclusions of this research were obscured by the design of the final report.

3) In the committee's report, the relationship between evidence and deduction from it is often other than logical. Condon expected that most of those interested would read the summary rather than the body of the report, and this appears to have been the case. Furthermore, I believe they didn't even read the summary very closely. Condon's conclusions do not follow from his data (Sturrock 1999). But few noticed. This may also explain the curious conclusions about climate change and *their* relationship to the data.

4) Often, only those who are true experts can see the problems or contradictions of a committee's report. Given a lack of such

expertise, the temptation for one committee to rubber-stamp what another committee has reported is often strong. And dissenters are often treated to some version of the "bum's rush" and shown the door.

5) Sometimes consulting the "other side" is the best way of finding the problems in the committee's conclusions. But consulting the other side is a rarity. And if they didn't get invited to the party, they will seldom be asked to dance.

Truth tends to emerge through conflict in science, rather than through consensus. Yet power is likely to try to engineer consensus. And often its tactics, as Henry Bauer has previously pointed out, are not pretty (Bauer 2012).

Notes

[1] Leonard Stringfield made investigation of apparent UFO crashes his specialty. His series of "Status Reports" provides the published part of his researches. His diaries are stored in Cinncinati under control of MUFON. For example, UFO Crash/Retrievals, Status Report VII: Search for Proof in a Hall of Mirrors, privately published, 1994.

[2] Robert Hastings, personal communication, 9 November 2015.

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