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The CIA's UFO History

by Mark Rodeghier

After the Cold War ended, the culture of secrecy and the operational style of the CIA began to change. Its director appeared on a radio talk show, and it became possible for citizens to pressure the CIA in ways unheard of during that earlier era. Ufology has been a beneficiary of these changes.

In late 1993, inquiries from several UFO researchers led CIA Director R. James Woolsey to order a review of all CIA files on UFOs. This agency-wide search occurred in 1994 and centralized the CIA's UFO files. Taking advantage of this opportunity, government historian Gerald K. Haines reviewed the documents, conducted interviews, and wrote a study examining the CIA's interest and involvement in UFO investigation and government UFO policy from 1947 until 1990.

Haines's study was published in *Studies in Intelligence*, a classified journal published quarterly for the intelligence community. The article, "CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947–90," appeared in the first semiannual unclassified edition for 1997, on pages 67–84. It can be found at <http://www.odci.gov/csi/studies/97unclas/ufo.html> [dead link]

This is a rather important document because it is the first time that a government agency has written a review of its involvement with UFOs. Although the study had been available at least since June when I downloaded it from the CIA Web site, it did not receive widespread publicity until early August. But when the press learned about the Haines study, the attention was dramatic. The story was carried in most large newspapers, on the NBC Nightly News, and many other media outlets. A typical headline from the Chicago Sun-Times reads, "CIA feared UFO hysteria." Several columnists used the CIA history as an opportunity to bash the CIA and secrecy in government, as exemplified by the column by David Wise (author of *The Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy, and Power*) in the New York Times "Big Lies and Little Green Men."

The media generally focused on two aspects of the Haines article. In a brief section entitled "CIA's U-2 and OXCART as UFOs," Haines claims that many UFO sightings in the late 1950s and 1960s were actually misidentified secret American spy planes. Moreover, he alleges that the Air Force's Project Blue Book was in on this cover-up, purposely misled the public, and falsified (Haines didn't use that word but that is plainly what the Air Force would be doing) UFO explanations. This is important news if true, and the media rightly played up this angle.

Note that the CIA is not accused of deception by Haines; rather, it is the Air Force that willingly concocted the bogus explanations. Reporters asked the Air Force for comment, and on August 4, Brigadier General Ronald Sconyers told the press, "I cannot confirm or deny that we lied. The Air Force is committed to providing accurate and timely information within the confines of national security."

General Sconyers sounds a bit like a weasel-worded politician, and his statement hardly serves to reduce the controversy. The second topic seized upon by the press and played up as news was the CIA-sponsored Robertson Panel from 1953. Yes, that is correct, the Robertson Panel, whose report has been well-known to anyone interested in UFOs for over 30 years now. That the press could consider the recommendations of the panel to be news at this

late date speaks volumes for the intelligence, reporting skills, and historical knowledge of the Fifth Estate. (The Washington Post, in full damage-control mode, said in an editorial that the study was "not an exposé full of new revelations," but the paper had already published an article claiming the opposite.)

Press coverage focused on the panel's recommendations that UFO reports be debunked (a policy Blue Book followed assiduously after 1953), that UFO groups be watched, and that there was a danger the Soviets might use UFOs to clog the channels of communication and then launch a nuclear attack. The deception about our spy planes was just a small part of this strategy.

Although the press was only late by about 40 years, their coverage of this aspect of the report is a positive note for ufology. What is clear from the tone of most articles is that the CIA's (and Air Force's) lies about UFOs are just further examples of all the many lies the American public had been told during the Cold War. And for once, ufologists are being viewed in a sympathetic light by the media as direct victims of government deception.

Coming on the heels of the Air Force's second report on Roswell, the tide has begun to turn against the government in the UFO debate. More and more, it is becoming apparent the government has lied about UFOs for years, and that it still may be lying today. Although the press gave so much coverage to the Haines article, it missed part of the story, failed to do any independent investigation, and generally swallowed the report as written. As Paul Harvey says, now for the rest of the story.

The CIA's excessive secrecy

The report by Haines is remarkably brief, given the CIA's complex UFO involvement. In its Internet version the full article is 21 pages in length, with eight pages of that for footnotes (with several interesting tidbits buried there). Whole swaths of history, such as the early 1970s, are compressed into a few paragraphs or sentences. Certainly a more complete study could be done, and perhaps the classified version is a bit longer.

Nevertheless, to this credit, Haines several times makes it clear that the CIA bungled the handling of UFOs because of its policies of excessive secrecy, in effect fueling the idea of a massive UFO cover-up (for which, not surprisingly, Haines finds no evidence). For example, in 1957 Leon Davidson, a UFO investigator who worked at getting the Robertson Panel report released and was a believer in a government cover-up, was working on a UFO case involving a strange tape recording made by the Maier sisters of Chicago. This tape had actually been analyzed by the CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence (OSI) and found to be "nothing more than Morse code from a US radio station."

When Davidson wrote to Dewelt Walker, the CIA officer who had contacted the Maier sisters, Walker obfuscated and refused to provide a straight answer about his role. When Davidson persisted, the CIA had the Air Force contact Davidson saying that Walker "was and is an Air Force Officer." Then to further screw things up, the CIA had one of its officers dress in an Air Force uniform and contact Davidson, claiming to speak on behalf of the Air Force. One cannot blame Davidson for believing there was a cover-up because, obviously, there was. As Haines writes, "Thus, a minor, rather bizarre incident, handled poorly by both the CIA and the Air Force, turned into a major flap that added fuel to the growing mystery surrounding UFOs and CIA's role in their investigation."

In another incident, officers from the Contact Division (CD) of the CIA obtained a UFO photograph from Ralph Mayher in November 1957. After the photos were returned (with no comment or analysis for Mayher), he contacted the CD for the CIA's evaluation because he wanted to mention it on a television program on which he was going to appear. The CIA declined.

Major Donald Keyhoe, head of NICAP, heard about these events and contacted the CIA to confirm the story. But the CIA refused, referring the matter to the Air Force, even though, as Haines writes, "CD field representatives were normally overt and carried credentials identifying their Agency association." No wonder, again, that ufologists would conclude the government was lying about its UFO activities.

Monitoring of UFO investigators

Although the CIA clearly lied to Davidson and Keyhoe, the actual UFO events at the heart of each story were mundane and not of particular importance. More sinister is the suggestion that the CIA (or FBI at the CIA's direction) has monitored UFO groups and investigators. Haines has no direct evidence for this, but it is unclear where such records would be kept or whether they would even be at the CIA (rather than the FBI). Certainly, the FBI has files on various ufologists, including Richard Hall, head of the Fund for UFO Research and long-time staffer at NICAP.

A complete history of the CIA's involvement in UFOs should have discussed this critical issue in depth; after all, the Robertson Panel recommended that UFO groups be monitored for subversive activities. That Haines did not fully discuss this subject can probably be attributed to his ignorance of UFO history, to the lack of documentation about this subject in CIA records, and perhaps, to the scope of his article which is more concerned with the investigation of UFOs rather than the investigation of ufologists.

The one bit of evidence Haines does include involves Leon Davidson again. In 1958, worried about future inquiries about government UFO investigation, the CIA met with the Air Force to discuss what to do with such requests. CIA officer Frank Chapin "hinted that Davidson might have ulterior motives" and he suggested having the FBI investigate Davidson. Haines says the record is unclear as to whether the FBI ever acted on this suggestion, but it is not clear how deeply Haines investigated this possibility.

Although the evidence is circumstantial, there are other hints that the government was monitoring UFO groups long before these discussions. In their book *UFOs Over the Americas*, Jim and Coral Lorenzen detail several rather bizarre incidents of what would seem to be rather clumsy attempts to learn the Lorenzens' motives for their UFO investigations and the work of APRO, the organization they founded. These occurred in several states over at least a dozen years, and the Lorenzens sound more amused by the experience than upset.

In point of fact, just about any ufologist would have been pleased to have the Air Force or CIA approach them and ask for advice about UFO investigations or what types of cases the investigator was receiving. The problem faced by these agencies, as Haines outlines, is that an excessive policy of secrecy kept them from openly contacting UFO investigators who most likely would have cooperated with government requests for information. As evidence, in early 1965 CIA agents finally did meet openly with Richard Hall at NICAP offices, who gladly gave them copies of UFO reports for the CIA's own review of the UFO situation.

The Robertson Panel

There is no more pivotal event in the CIA's involvement with UFOs, perhaps in the U.S. government's interest in UFOs, than the Robertson Panel of January 1953. Haines devotes just over a page to this critical study, which provides him no room for nuance or much more than a bare reciting of the facts.

In his review of CIA documents he demonstrates the very high-level CIA interest in UFOs engendered by the UFO flap in the summer of 1952 and, especially, the sightings over Washington, D.C. A special study group was formed within OSI to review the UFO situation. Director Walter Bedell Smith "wanted to know whether or not the Air Force investigation of flying saucers was sufficiently objective," and he wondered "what use could be made of the UFO phenomenon in connection with US psychological warfare efforts."

Memos and meetings were frequent in late 1952 as the CIA considered what should be done about the UFO problem. Haines's research shows that the Robertson Panel's concerns about the clogging of communication channels and the use of UFOs to disrupt U.S. air defenses were taken straight from CIA concerns expressed in internal memos during the summer of 1952. In other words, the Robertson Panel, despite the eminence of the scientists involved, appears to have been carefully orchestrated by the CIA to come to the conclusions it did, which included debunking UFOs with the help of the Air Force Project Blue Book. Haines does not comment on this element of the CIA's role in determining government policy.

Spy planes and UFOs

I turn now to the issue that so dominated press coverage of Haines's article, the claim that many UFO reports were caused by secret aircraft flights. Given the nature of many UFO reports of objects seen at close range low to the ground, ufologists have uniformly found this claim preposterous. I have over the years personally reviewed the majority of Blue Book reports and know that that they were not caused by misidentifications of spy planes. But because this is such an important claim, here is the full discussion of this issue by Haines.

In November 1954, CIA had entered into the world of high technology with its U-2 overhead reconnaissance project. Working with Lockheed's Advanced Development facility in Burbank, California, known as the Skunk Works, and Kelly Johnson, an eminent aeronautical engineer, the Agency by August 1955 was testing a high-altitude experimental aircraft—the U-2. It could fly at 60,000 feet; in the mid-1950s, most commercial airliners flew between 10,000 feet and 20,000 feet. Consequently, once the U-2 started test flights, commercial pilots and air traffic controllers began reporting a large increase in UFO sightings.

The early U-2s were silver (they were later painted black) and reflected the rays from the sun, especially at sunrise and sunset. They often appeared as fiery objects to observers below. Air Force BLUE BOOK investigators aware of the secret U-2 flights tried to explain away such sightings by linking them to natural phenomena such as ice crystals and temperature inversions. By checking with the Agency's U-2 Project Staff in Washington, BLUE BOOK investigators were able to attribute many UFO sightings to U-2 flights. They were careful, however, not to reveal the true cause of the sighting to the public.

According to later estimates from CIA officials who worked on the U-2 project and the OXCART (SR-71, or Blackbird) project, over half of all UFO reports from the late 1950s through the 1960s were accounted for by manned reconnaissance flights (namely the U-2)

over the United States. This led the Air Force to make misleading and deceptive statements to the public in order to allay public fears and to protect an extraordinarily sensitive national security project. While perhaps justified, this deception added fuel to the later conspiracy theories and the cover-up controversy of the 1970s. The percentage of what the Air Force considered unexplained UFO sightings fell to 5.9 percent in 1955 and to 4 percent in 1956.

What exactly is the evidence for the claim that "over half of all UFO reports . . . were accounted for by manned reconnaissance flights"? In one footnote, Haines mentions the monograph *The Central Intelligence Agency and Overhead Reconnaissance: The U-2 and OXCART Programs, 1954–1974*, by Gregory W. Pedlow and Donald E. Welzenbach (1992). A colleague at CUFOS tried to obtain a copy of this reference, which was published by the CIA History Staff, but has been told the monograph is classified. That makes it impossible to verify its accuracy. In a second footnote, Haines mentions a telephone interview with a John Parongosky, who "oversaw the day-to-day affairs of the OXCART program." I would like to call Mr. Parongosky myself, but have been unable to find any listing or address for him. In any case, there is a very straightforward step which could verify this claim about spy planes, one I am surprised was not taken by at least one reporter. If the Air Force was lying about the cause of UFO sightings to protect the secrecy of our spy planes, then obviously the heads of Blue Book would have been central to the deception. Yet no one seems to have contacted any of these officers, most of whom are still living, for a comment.

I had previously spoken to Lt. Col. (Ret.) Robert Friend, head of Blue Book from about 1958 to early 1963, on a matter of UFO history, so I called him again recently to discuss this subject. Friend had not heard about the CIA report (he doesn't watch much television and doesn't follow UFO news closely these days), but he was very interested to learn about its existence. He asked me for a copy plus any news stories I had on the report.

I read to him the discussion by Haines reproduced above and then asked for his comment. Almost the first words he said were that it is "absolutely not true" that he or his Blue Book team were covering up spy flights as alleged by Haines. He found the whole idea laughable, and he knew Blue Book did not receive more reports from pilots and air traffic controllers after the U-2 began flying.

I asked him if he had ever concealed classified activities that were reported as UFOs. Friend indicated that, indeed, this had occurred on a few occasions, but it was not a regular occurrence. I inquired as to whether he had regular contact with the CIA at Blue Book. He said that he did because the CIA overlooked no potential source of information and wanted to keep tabs on all government intelligence activities. In addition, the Air Force had utilized the services of the National Photographic Interpretation Center, the CIA's photo analysis office, to analyze UFO photos. However, in none of his contacts with the CIA or U-2 project staff was Friend ever told to conceal sightings of the U-2 by the CIA.

To be absolutely sure before I ended the conversation, I asked Friend whether the project had ever received a sighting which he recognized as caused by a U-2 (or other secret aircraft). He said, to his recollection, no. Once again, he chuckled about the idea of half of all UFO reports being caused by manned reconnaissance flights. I then read him the statement by Sconyers quoted earlier, in which the general cannot "confirm or deny that we lied." This brought a guffaw from Friend, who wondered why Sconyers, or anyone currently in the Pentagon, should know what happened 30 years ago. We both marveled at how the press and the military (and Haines) had failed to contact the obvious central figures in this alleged cover-up.

In summary, then, the claim that motivated the press coverage of Haines's report is inaccurate and is not evidence for a CIA and Air Force cover-up of UFO sightings and lies to the American public. Yet the CIA and Air Force did knowingly debunk UFO sightings, and Blue Book personnel often came up with any old explanation so that the yearly summary sheets would have only a small percentage of unidentified sightings. So I'm not too unhappy that the CIA and Air Force were taken to task for something they didn't do, but it is important to set the record straight.

Forcing disclosure of CIA records

Beginning in the mid-1970s, UFO researchers began using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to request government, including CIA, documents on UFOs. Once again, the CIA mishandled the requests. After William Spaulding, head of Ground Saucer Watch, wrote in 1975 requesting UFO records, the CIA Information and Privacy Coordinator Gene Wilson wrote to Spaulding that the Robertson Panel was "the summation of the Agency interest and involvement in UFOs." As Haines states, "Wilson was ill-informed."

Not believing Wilson's statements, ufologists sued the CIA for records and won the release of about 800 pages in December of 1978. Since the CIA had, unwisely, been denying its involvement in UFO matters, the media was surprised to learn how many documents were held by the agency. The New York Times claimed as a result that the CIA was probably secretly involved in the study of UFOs.

CIA Director Stansfield Turner was so upset by this that he asked his senior officers "Are we in UFOs?" He received a negative answer from his deputy and so moved to quash a new lawsuit asking for the withheld documents from the first release. Notwithstanding the reply Turner got, Haines found that the CIA continued a few activities during the 1980s. As he writes:

During the late 1970s and 1980s, the Agency continued its low-key interest in UFOs and UFO sightings. While most scientists now dismissed flying saucers [sic] reports as a quaint part of the 1950s and 1960s, some in the Agency and in the Intelligence Community shifted their interest to studying parapsychology and psychic phenomena associated with UFO sightings. CIA officials also looked at the UFO problem to determine what UFO sightings might tell them about Soviet progress in rockets and missiles and reviewed its counterintelligence aspects. Agency analysts from the Life Science Division of OSI and OSWR officially devoted a small amount of their time to issues relating to UFOs. These included counterintelligence concerns that the Soviets and the KGB were using US citizens and UFO groups to obtain information on sensitive US weapons development programs (such as the Stealth aircraft), the vulnerability of the US air-defense network to penetration by foreign missiles mimicking UFOs, and evidence of Soviet advanced technology associated with UFO sightings.

If I hadn't checked the calendar after reading this, I would have sworn this was 1952 and I was reading of CIA concerns about how UFOs could be used by the Soviets against the United States, as eventually expressed in the recommendations of the Robertson Panel report. Some things never change, at least during the Cold War. Haines notes that during this period, "Agency officials purposely kept files on UFOs to a minimum to avoid creating records that might mislead the public if released," and Haines says he found almost no documentation on CIA involvement with UFOs in the 1980s. This certainly is an effective method to circumvent FOIA, but it hardly leads to further confidence in the CIA.

Finally, in an intriguing footnote, Haines says that the "CIA reportedly is also a member of an Incident Response Team to investigate UFO landings, if one should occur. This team has never met." Say what? He offers no evidence for this statement, which, if true, belies the notion that the government completely ignores UFO reports.

In the end, Haines's article is not as revealing as press reports indicated, but it does open a window on CIA activities that have long been closed to the public. Perhaps its chief contribution will be the documents referenced in the footnotes which can now be specifically requested through FOIA by an enterprising UFO historian. His historical analysis is unremittingly pedestrian, but he does admit that CIA errors of commission and omission contributed directly to the notion of a UFO cover-up, and he demonstrates that there was indeed a cover-up, though not of spy planes, of a UFO crash near Roswell, nor other events of similar import.

Another effect of Haines's article is a gradual shifting of media opinion toward granting greater credibility to the statements of UFO groups and investigators and a concomitant greater distrust in government claims about its UFO activities. This is all to the good and here the old phrase "better late than never" surely applies. Those wishing to acquire the full text of the article may download a copy from the CIA's Web site at <http://www.odci.gov/csi/studies/97unclas/ufo.html> (This site has since been removed from the CIA website.). Hard copies can be obtained from the Photoduplication Service, National Technical Information Service, 5285 Port Royal Road, Springfield, VA 22161. To expedite service, call the NTIS Order Desk at (703) 487-4650.