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*UFOs and ufologists have always had their share of critics. Some of the criticism has been warranted; most, however, has not. In fact, if one wanted to do so, one might be able to construct a case for the reality of UFOs solely from the arguments of the would-be debunkers. In other words, if UFOs don't exist, all that it would take to demonstrate as much to any reasonable thinking person would be a calm, dispassionate review of all the facts. It would not be necessary to engage in ad hominem attacks on witnesses and investigators, to twist or distort key elements of UFO cases, to posit the existence of a vast international conspiracy to trick us into believing UFOs are here. Nor would the would-be debunkers be so terrified of the prospect of renewed government and scientific inquiries into the phenomenon—efforts which they expend considerable energy in trying to prevent. If UFOs don't exist, as the men whose work Dr. David Jacobs discusses below are always telling us, one would think they would welcome such studies, which if the skeptics are right could only substantiate their claims. What are they afraid of? The answer may be all too obvious.*

## **The Debunkers** **by David M. Jacobs**

Skepticism is an essential component of UFO investigations. The best and most thorough UFO researchers are often the most skeptical about a given case. Without skepticism UFO investigators would be unable to separate the real from the unreal, the important from the unimportant, the signal from the noise, and UFO research would be either chaotic or impossible.

Skepticism is crucial for UFO research for several

reasons. Misperceptions of natural phenomena make up the vast majority of raw unevaluated UFO reports. Psychologically disturbed people have claimed to be in communication with aliens from other planets. Quick-buck artists and charlatans have conned the unsuspecting with false claims of ongoing contacts with "Space Brothers." Photographs have been faked or the "UFOs" in them have turned out to be emulsion flaws. Radar operators are fooled by anomalous propagation. People lie. Serious investigators know that 90 percent or more of unevaluated UFO reports have a mundane explanation which can be uncovered with proper analysis. It is the 10 percent of reports that remain unidentified even after scientific analysis that comprises the core of the UFO controversy.

Unfortunately the UFO phenomenon does not easily lend itself to systematic study. The evidence for its existence is largely anecdotal, and with human testimony come human failures and vagaries. Because the phenomenon is not predictable, no one can tell when or where a sighting will occur or when a wave of sightings will begin. Once sighted, a UFO will not stay in one place long enough for anything but its effects (if, for example, it leaves traces on the ground) to be scientifically measured and analyzed. UFOs themselves cannot of course be reproduced in a laboratory.

If one attempts to study UFOs, one is confronted with a *polymathic* field, that is, an area of study which draws on many different already established scientific disciplines and combines them with its own special attributes. Because it is an eclectic field, UFO research does not fall within any single established scientific discipline. Therefore, no scientist can lay claim to a special expertise simply because his or her own specialty might overlap part of UFO research.

Moreover, as is the case with all disciplines, it takes years of study to obtain an adequate grasp of the phenomenon, but even then the researcher faces something that is potentially unknowable and fundamentally incomprehensible. The resulting uncertainties have led to the development of factions espousing varying, sometimes conflicting interpretations of what the evidence means.

In addition to UFO research's intrinsic problems,

scientists are confronted with other roadblocks to the study of UFOs. Most scientists do not study the phenomenon because they see no reason to do so. Few scientists care to embark on a new four- or five-year study of another subject when their careers are already established. Because of the unknowables and complexities surrounding the subject, scientists do not have a reasonable expectation of solving the problem even if they do study UFOs. If they cannot realize their goals, why should they bother?

Furthermore, funding organizations have provided no money with which to study UFOs—and funding is a significant determining factor in scientists' decisions to embark on new career objectives. Finally, and perhaps most important, ridicule is still so great that scientists shy away from the subject for fear that their colleagues will call their judgement into question and thereby jeopardize their careers.

The ridicule factor has made UFO research appear to be more of a subject for scholars of popular culture than for scholars of science. Certainly there is plenty to interest students of popular culture. Pulp magazine "UFO experts" write sensational articles about UFOs; over the years the Hollywood motion-picture industry has cranked out numerous "flying saucer" movies based on nothing more than wild imaginings; tabloid newspapers with no respect for truth tell lurid tales of UFO encounters and contacts; and manufacturers have even marketed "UFO candy."

Yet the UFO phenomenon itself—quite apart from the popular distortions of it—is a legitimate if difficult subject for scientific inquiry. To become knowledgeable about UFOs, a scientist must study the subject thoroughly over a period of years, become familiar with the literature and conduct field investigations. In short, the scientist—or anyone involved in systematic inquiry—must "retool" and start from the beginning. Because few scientists have done this, most know practically nothing about UFOs. Their ignorance of the subject has much to do with their attitudes toward it.

The average scientist believes that the UFO problem is nonsense. Consequently when he is called upon to explain a UFO report, he approaches the problem with the

assumption that gullible people absurdly mistake common objects for visitors from outer space. Since he knows little if anything about the patterns associated with the mass of UFO reports, the scientist often advances what he thinks is a commonsense solution to the case, even if—as frequently happens—he has to ignore data or change facts to fit his preconceived solution. He assumes he has the right to do so because everyone knows it's ridiculous to suggest that a person has seen a spacecraft from another planet—and scientists most often assume that the extraterrestrial hypothesis is what the UFO controversy is all about. In reality it is absolutely essential for scientists to establish the existence (or nonexistence) of an anomalous phenomenon *irrespective of speculations about its origins*. This is probably the most common logical flaw in the way scientists think about UFOs.

Given this frame of mind, scientists have come up with some novel solutions to UFO reports. They have decided that the supposed UFOs are in fact clouds of insects, floating cobwebs, long-duration plasmas, lunar dust caught in the earth's gravitational field, and so on. Although some of these explanations may be valid for a few reports, they shed little light on UFO sightings in general and the unidentified reports in specific. These kinds of explanations serve only to betray the scientists' ignorance of the subject and to reveal their courage in making that fact known.

Apart from this all-pervasive ignorance in the scientific community, a few scientists have assumed the mantle of UFO "debunkers." Debunking is the act of exposing the falseness of an issue. Armed with a limited knowledge of UFOs and assuming the extraterrestrial hypothesis as the only alternative nonmundane explanation for reports, the debunkers have embarked on a crusade to save society from the heresies of "pseudoscience."

Instead of focusing exclusively on individual cases, they have chosen to attack the whole field of UFO research as one more suited to the concerns of science fiction than of science fact. In recent years the scientist-debunkers have been reinforced by nonscientist debunkers. Together they have worked to stifle the scientific community's interest in UFOs and to contribute in great part to the ridicule from

which the UFO problem has already suffered. Among their methods—not exactly scientific ones, it need hardly be said—are character assassination and factual distortion.

Carl Sagan, Donald Menzel, and Edward Condon are the three scientists who have expended the most effort to debunk UFOs.

Sagan has had some limited experience with UFO research. He was a member of an informal panel on UFOs that met under the Air Force's direction for one day in 1966; he sponsored the 1969 American Association for the Advancement of Science's symposium on UFOs; and he edited the papers for publication. Sagan's rather slight UFO involvement and his considerable reputation as one of the nation's leading experts on the search for extraterrestrial life has led people to believe that he knows what he is talking about when he claims the UFO problem can easily be solved by simple logic and common sense. In his writings and on numerous television shows he regularly and incorrectly declares that there are no UFO reports which are both interesting and reliable. Either Sagan is unaware of the large number of cases of exactly this type or he simply chooses to ignore them.<sup>1</sup> Instead of admitting he does not know enough about the subject to speak about it, Sagan implies the opposite—that he has examined all the evidence and found it wanting—though there is no evidence that he has done so. Sagan clearly has no contribution to make to the problem other than as an interested, if untrained, observer.

Although neither Donald Menzel nor Edward Condon was ever the influential media celebrity Sagan has become, the two nevertheless had tremendous influence in shaping the style of debunking.

Menzel, a famous Harvard University astronomer, possessed most of the basic characteristics of the ill-informed scientist who nonetheless believed he knew the "truth" about UFOs. The subject so obsessed him that he wrote three books on it, the first published in 1953, the second in 1963, and the third after his death in 1977. Essentially the three books are the same book successively revised to cover recent cases and debunking theories.<sup>2</sup>

Menzel wanted to prove not only that all UFOs are

explainable but that UFO witnesses are gullible, ignorant people at best or dangerous charlatans and hoaxers at worst. He claimed that the spread of pseudoscientific nonsense such as UFO studies destroys science's credibility and weakens people's faith in scientists. Although Menzel thought he was performing a valuable service to society by championing the cause of rationality, logic, and the scientific method, in fact his UFO books serve to undermine his intentions. The very antithesis of the scientific method, they rely on faulty reasoning, illogic, poor UFO cases, and debunkers' unsubstantiated explanations for sighting reports.

For Menzel the idea that UFO sightings might be of anomalous phenomena was preposterous. Since misinterpretations, misperceptions, hoaxes, and psychological aberrations make up the bulk of all identifiable reports, he argued, then they must make up the bulk of all unidentifiable reports as well. If cases still remained unidentified after scientific analysis, then the analysts were faulty. In Menzel's and the debunkers' universe, science can explain all and there is no room for unexplained events. Menzel suggested that the real culprits were the media, which publicized UFO reports and helped create "UFO hysteria."

The late Edward U. Condon, the noted physicist and leader of the Air Force-sponsored University of Colorado's UFO project, agreed with Menzel but never delved into the cases, even on the superficial level at which Menzel approached them. For him the UFO world was composed exclusively of such contactees as Truman Bethurum, kooks, fringe-personality scientists, weirdos and crazies. Like Menzel, Condon believed the very idea of UFOs is dangerous because it encourages the ignorant populace's love of "psychic sciences" and false gods. In fact Condon urged that people who taught about UFOs in classrooms be "horsewhipped."<sup>3</sup>

The scientist-debunkers have been aided in their emotional search for the rational by the nonscientist debunkers, who have spearheaded a most intensive attack on UFO research in recent years. The attack comes from men associated with the *Skeptical Inquirer* (formerly *The*

*Zetetic*), the journal of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

The three most vociferous and active lay-debunkers are Philip J. Klass, an editor of *Aviation Week & Space Technology* magazine and author of two debunking books on UFOs, and Robert Sheaffer and James Oberg, both billed as "science writers." All are members of the committee's UFO-debunking subcommittee. Along with Martin Gardner, long a hostile critic of unorthodox claims and ideas, they have published debunking articles in a variety of magazines, ranging from the *New York Review of Books* through the slick *Omni* to the UFO pulps.

For these men, the battle is not over whether UFOs represent anomalous phenomena; rather it is a crusade to expose the illegitimacy of the UFO phenomenon, the poor techniques that UFO researchers employ, and the shady character of UFO investigators, who are routinely accused of exploiting UFOs for monetary gain. To make their points, these debunkers regularly resort to name-calling, mudslinging, sarcasm, and questionable analyses of cases.

Like the scientist-debunkers they pose as fighters of the good fight against the dark forces of evil. More than anything else they seek to dissuade interested people from examining the UFO phenomenon. In the process they devote enormous energy to studying, discussing, and writing about a phenomenon which they say should not be studied, discussed, or written about.

The lay-debunkers have tried to demonstrate that the UFO phenomenon is not only a mixture of the standard elements of human fallibility but the product of a rather remarkable series of coincidences. Klass's explanation for the Mansfield, Ohio, UFO-helicopter encounter of October 18, 1973, was that a "meteor" flew by at the very moment the crew lost radio contact with nearby airfields. The extraordinary action of the helicopter's rapid ascent at the same time was caused by unconscious movements of the pilot. The entire incident, in short, is a series of coincidences. Similarly, referring to another explanation which depends heavily on simultaneous coincidences, Klass writes, "I grant that my explanation assumes a combination of several infrequent but not rare events. But the fact that a

combination of infrequent events does occasionally occur is evidenced by the existence of the word 'coincidence' to describe such situations." He then clinches his argument by telling of a man who had been struck by lightning five times! <sup>4</sup>

A common method of debunking UFOs is the setting up of a straw man. The easiest way to do this is to present what is obviously an identified flying object (IFO) case as a UFO and then to "solve" the case. To the uninitiated this old technique makes the routine IFO report appear to be a typical example of *all* UFO reports and shows how dispassionate investigation can explain every UFO sighting. This is why Phil Klass devotes many chapters in one of his books to standard misidentification cases. And he goes one step further by giving an object a dual name such as a "Plasma-UFO," suggesting that the phrase "UFO" cannot stand legitimately by itself. <sup>5</sup>

Debunkers routinely ignore facts and change data to fit their analyses. Captain Lawrence Coyne's helicopter could not possibly have been on the route it took when it encountered an extraordinary object; therefore it was on a different route, thus making the meteor explanation possible. When a case cannot be solved by changing or ignoring data, then the lay-debunkers conclude the witnesses are probably liars.

The media draw especially bitter ire from the debunkers. According to them, the media not only created UFO sighting waves but also promulgated the myth that UFOs might represent anomalous phenomena. For instance, in discussing the 1952 UFO wave, Klass states that by 1953 "more important issues dominated the news, such as whether the new Eisenhower administration could end the increasingly unpopular war in Korea, and so there was a sharp decline in the UFO reports published in the national news media. And the number of UFO reports submitted to the USAF [U.S. Air Force] also declined sharply to about one-third the 1952 figure." <sup>6</sup>

These generalizations, though highly dubious, are stated as if they were reasonable fact. They are about as rational as Condon Committee member William Hartmann's claim that the 1952 wave erupted because the

year before people had seen the science-fiction movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. To substantiate such a sweeping assertion one would have to collect and analyze data on the number of people who saw the movie, the number who remembered it, the number who might be suggestible enough to imagine UFOs, and the number of them who reported the UFOs to the proper authorities. None of this was done, of course. In other words Hartmann's statement, like Klass's, was off the top of his head and was based on nothing at all. <sup>7</sup>

Describing the reasons for the 1973 UFO wave, Klass suggests that the Ohio newspapers, in competition for ever more sensational UFO articles, outdid themselves in printing any UFO story that came along, thereby creating a wave of media-generated UFO sightings. He boldly adds, "Until a UFO flap achieves national attention, its center of activity tends to move outward to adjacent areas like ripples caused by dropping a rock into a pool of water." <sup>8</sup>

This unsubstantiated statement allows Klass to place the beginning of the 1973 wave in Ohio, which was not in fact where it actually started. Donald Menzel had the same attitude toward the media, which he believed to be heavily biased in favor of "believers." In reality the long history of the media's reaction to UFOs suggests that for the most part newspapers have tended to ridicule reports and to treat them as insubstantial, lighthearted "silly season" stories.

Debunkers also claim there is a dearth of radar evidence for UFOs. Although many radar cases exist, so far as we know there are none in which objects from space have been tracked on radar coming into the earth's atmosphere to be reported as UFOs. In other cases UFOs have been seen at high altitudes but radar failed to pick them up.

It certainly is true that the majority of significant cases with the most data are of objects relatively near to the ground. This is a puzzling aspect of the phenomenon but not an argument against its existence. But for Klass this is not only an argument against the objective reality of UFOs but also evidence of a media conspiracy to hide the truth. He writes, "Yet somehow the numerous UFOs being

reported during the fall of 1973 seemed to avoid being detected and tracked by [the FAA's] extensive radar networks—a point that was occasionally mentioned in a few news stories but invariably 'buried' far down in the article."<sup>9</sup>

The debunkers, as I already have mentioned, do not content themselves simply with attacks on UFOs; they also attack the people interested in them. Characteristically the debunkers ridicule "UFO buffs" who hold to absurd ideas without regard for the truth, in contrast to the trustworthy and conscientious debunkers. Trying to demonstrate what a good investigator he is, Klass tells us, "My own experience indicates that a UFO investigator should at least attempt to prove each case carefully, regardless of the number of 'witnesses,' to establish its credibility. This I attempted to do. . . ." <sup>10</sup> Yet not infrequently Klass explains cases—usually as hoaxes—without ever having interviewed the principal alleged witness—or in some cases, as in the Father William Gill CEIII, *any* of the witnesses.

For the debunkers the entire field of UFO research is "dominated by the irrational." UFO investigators are illogical and credulous. "Believing in" certain cases is "an article of faith" among UFO researchers. Scientists who are attracted to UFO studies "are those with a very strong desire to believe in extraterrestrial visitations" and are therefore presumably unscientific. The UFO "buffs" who make up the bulk of the membership of the UFO organizations are just as bad as the "experts." They are gullible, ignorant people whose shrill cries for increased study of the phenomenon cause more trouble than the average American realizes.<sup>11</sup>

As proof of this, Robert Sheaffer and Klass talk about the "strident claims" of UFO buffs who do not think for themselves but who religiously adhere to a "dogma."<sup>12</sup> UFO buffs are psychologically disturbed people who bother responsible scientists.

When NASA was considering a UFO study in 1977, Klass quoted a letter to the President's Science Advisor, Frank Press, from an obviously uneducated and misguided

individual who wanted the "cover-up" ended. Klass used this as "evidence" that all UFO buffs are of this stripe; he explains, "Dr. Press's office was responding to the increased flow of mail from the UFO buffs."<sup>13</sup> Yet while Klass was trying to get us to believe "UFO buffs" were plaguing NASA and Dr. Press, Robert Sheaffer later revealed that 87 percent of the letters to NASA were from children!<sup>14</sup> In their zeal to make their points, the debunkers often contradict each other, apparently oblivious to the fact that they are doing so.

The straw-man technique is also liberally applied to UFO proponents. The idea is to suggest that the UFO research community is of one mind and has a "line" which everyone espouses. The debunkers do not discuss the complexities of UFO research, the clashing personalities and the contending theories, nor do they acknowledge the differences in experience, perception, and conclusions of people in a field of study dominated by amateurs. James Oberg, in debunking the astronaut "sightings" (most of which are not considered to be legitimate by UFO researchers), insists on categorizing UFO researchers as irrational cultists who passionately insist that patently bogus UFO sightings are genuine. For instance, he claims that "UFO buffs" acclaimed a fake photograph as "one of the best UFO photos ever taken. . . ."

In the same article Oberg takes a fictitious astronaut yarn and says, "This story appears to be a complete fabrication but UFO buffs cling to it while challenging skeptics to prove it did not happen." Once he has set up the straw man, Oberg comes to his main conclusion: "The entire phenomenon of 'astronaut UFO sightings,' however, does explicitly demonstrate the carelessness and lack of verification among UFO circles eager to exchange the latest hot stories without any regard for authenticity or accuracy."<sup>15</sup>

One of the continuing problems with UFO studies is that almost anyone can submit an article to a sensationalistic pulp magazine and call himself a "UFO expert"—or, if he doesn't, the sensationalistic pulp may do it for him. UFO debunkers, aware of who has expertise and who does not, nevertheless carefully quote these "experts" be-

cause it makes the field of UFO research seem to be dominated by shallow exploiters whose primary interests are financial ones. Since the material these hack writers offer is of uniformly low quality, it is easy to destroy. The debunkers typically leave one with the impression that *all* UFO material is as poor; after all, these are the cases the "experts" have presented, are they not?

The national UFO organizations do not escape the debunkers' avenging wrath. The debunking literature pictures these organizations as conspiring to trick people into believing in the reality of UFOs while at the same time they pick their pockets. In the "Psychic Vibrations" section of the *Skeptical Inquirer* the author (probably Sheaffer) claims that the Center for UFO Studies, which "just happens to have UFO publications for sale, reports that since the movie [*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*] opened, their [sic] mails have soared a whopping 1,500 percent" and this is "a real bonanza."

When the truth about a UFO sighting comes out—that is, when it is successfully explained as an IFO—the debunkers charge that the UFO organizations try to hide this fact. Klass maintains they do so to ensure that money continues to flow into their treasuries.<sup>16</sup> If people were aware of all the IFOs, then presumably they would leave the organizations *en masse*. Klass further asserts that UFO researchers who do not toe the line and who say the wrong thing—such as that UFOs do not represent evidence for extraterrestrial visitation—are "purged" from their positions of responsibility in the organizations.<sup>17</sup> Presumably then UFO researchers are members of dictatorial, thought-controlling organizations. Anyone who has ever been a member of such an organization will immediately appreciate just how ridiculous this idea really is.

Of all the scientists who have studied UFOs, the most hated, the most vilified of all is J. Allen Hynek. Klass, Sheaffer, Oberg, and other debunkers view Hynek as the personification of all that is evil in UFO research. Consequently Hynek has been subjected to an incredible barrage of character assassination.

After *Newsweek* ran an article calling Hynek the

"Galileo of Ufology," Sheaffer used heavy sarcasm to change the meaning by calling him the "self-styled Galileo of UFO studies"—as if Hynek had styled *himself* by that name! To Martin Gardner, Hynek is the "Conan Doyle of ufology"—Doyle sought to prove the existence of fairies—who writes in "tawdry occult pulp magazines." To Klass, Hynek is the new "spiritual leader" of UFO buffs who turns a blind eye to the reasonable arguments of the debunkers.<sup>18</sup>

Why is scientist Hynek so committed to the irrational? To make money, of course. To do this, Hynek acquired an "impressive-sounding title, 'Director of the Center for UFO Studies,' " which was only a one-man operation run out of his home.<sup>19</sup> With this front Hynek set out to capitalize on the flying saucer market by selling publications and Hynek's packaged, recorded lecture (designed for delivery in planetariums) in order to take advantage of the release of the movie *Close Encounters*. The *Skeptical Inquirer* made these critical connections:

"Dr. Hynek's filmed UFO lecture coincides amazingly well with the scheduled release of the UFO movie into which Columbia has invested many millions of dollars. No word yet on how many planetariums are accepting the offer, but some astronomers are clearly annoyed, chiefly those who believe that the function of a planetarium is science education, not the promotion of commercial ventures which capitalize on public credulity."<sup>20</sup>

For the debunkers, *all* cases can be explained. There are no unanswered questions, no anomalous phenomena, no UFOs. UFOs must not be studied; the pursuit of knowledge when applied to these hated phenomena must cease. And the world is populated with evil people who seek to rob others of either their money or their credibility, or maybe both. It is an odd world view, certainly the antithesis of scientific objectivity; yet it is a world view that purports to be scientifically objective.

The world of the debunkers has a curiously naïve quality to it. The debunkers feel left out of the "UFO scene." They continually complain that they are not invited to speak at UFO symposia and they fear that their



voices will be like those in the wilderness, unheard and unheeded. Seeing themselves as Christlike would-be saviors of humanity, they imagine themselves bearing the cross of truth while all around them exist infidels who will not repent of their misguided ways.

Yet at the same time the parallels with the charlatan-hoaxer contactees of the 1950s are quite striking. Both the charlatans and the debunkers have tried to portray themselves as possessors of truth confronted with the forces of conspiracy and evil. Both groups found enemies in mainstream UFO research and both groups were made to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous accusations and claims. "The voices of the UFO believers are heard day in, day out, in the newspapers, in magazines, on radio and TV (especially on NBC!), but the voice of knowledgeable skeptics almost never reaches the public," the debunkers wail.<sup>21</sup> The forces of darkness are on the march.

The debunkers choose to view themselves as hard-bitten realists doing battle with fuzzy-minded idealists and dreamers. They understand the real world while the ufologists are dreamers who believe in fantasies. One is reminded of the anticommunist crusades of the 1940s and of the tactics Senator Joe McCarthy used in the early 1950s to root out communists by whatever means necessary. All the while McCarthy depicted himself as a hard-bitten realist, his critics as fuzzy-minded dreamers—or worse.

The debunkers' McCarthyite mind-set leads them on a crusade to destroy the UFO phenomenon and its adherents in any way possible. Like McCarthy they are apocalyptists. For McCarthy it was America that was in imminent danger; for the debunkers it is nothing less than the rational world—at least as they define the term.

In the end the witch-hunters of the anti-Communist period did far more evil than good. They stifled free speech and dissent, muted rational inquiry, denied political discourse, and ruined careers. Historians regard the anti-Communist hysteria as a shameful episode. When historians judge the role of the debunkers in the UFO controversy, the verdict may well be the same.

## NOTES

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