

# CONDON v. SAUNDERS

The End of an Era

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WITH the almost simultaneous appearance of the Condon Committee Report and Saunders and Harkins *UFOs? Yes!* the American public is faced with a rather unique situation. The Condon Committee Report represents some \$500,000 of their tax money, spent by their government, to investigate their complaints and inquiries regarding the UFO Phenomenon. Dr. David R. Saunders, formerly a key member of that Committee, now presents them with his documented contention that their money was not spent fairly or wisely. In short, a "trick" may have occurred at their expense.

If ever there were two documents written to complement, yet contradict each other, it would certainly be these two. Furthermore, each is essential to the objective comprehension of the other.

The initial appearance of the 965-page Condon Report in paperback form (*Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects*, Bantam Books, 1969) assures it a rapid and widespread circulation. A series of news releases in conjunction with the publication indicates that the authors of the Report were aiming at a thorough public absorption of the material at the fastest possible rate.

Reporters who had made a superficial examination of the report, were quick to rush into print with items expressing relief that the whole UFO business had been explained away. However those news analysts who had examined the entire Report, and had gotten past the "UFO's are dead" attitude, found it to be "remarkably open-minded" and felt that it leaves "just enough for firm believers to grab on to".<sup>1</sup> Aimé Michel's thoughts on this matter have turned out to be painfully accurate.<sup>2</sup>

It is to be expected that the Air Force or some other official agency will be most interested in the acceptability of the Report when determining what the next step will be. Most probably they will contract with a public opinion survey group, as the Condon Committee did, towards this end. This procedure would be quite logical and I suggest that it would be even more interesting to compare the results of such a survey with one taken after the next well-publicised "flap".

## On Governmental Involvement

An inevitable question is whether or not the Report was influenced by some governmental agency involved in possible suppression or distortion of UFO data.

The Lorenzens have dealt quite adequately with this topic in two of their recent books.<sup>3</sup> They have postulated that if their theories are correct, there would be a governmental agent "on or near the committee, quietly monitoring its activities and preparing to subvert the final report for intelligence purposes if it seems advisable."<sup>4</sup>

Personally, I can find no valid reason for objecting to possible CIA involvement in the UFO Phenomenon.

It would have every right to be involved, and *may even* have a right, from their viewpoint of national security, to attempt to exert a clandestine influence on public opinion. The craft of intelligence is an extremely complex one, especially when it is concerned with the welfare of the most powerful nation on Earth. All manner of justifications can be found for seemingly disreputable actions.

Once this involvement is accepted as probable it is quite irrelevant whether or not this agency chooses to inform the public, or to exert influences in this area. With or without this involvement, the true perspective of the Phenomenon can be discerned by the diligent researcher.

## Case Studies

Over 200 pages of the Report are devoted to fairly comprehensive accounts of the field investigations conducted during the 2-year period. This is the most impressive part of the study where it will be seen that, despite recommendations to the contrary in Condon's summary of the Report, the advisability, indeed the need, for further investigation into the Phenomenon would be quite clearly indicated to any scientist.

Of the 59 case studies discussed, only half are given a natural explanation, and about nine are listed as unidentified. In many instances the explanation had to be "stretched" to fit the case, and in others it seems as if the Committee had indeed found the natural cause for the sighting.

I was most anxious to see how the Committee handled a particular landing report which occurred in December of 1967, and which I consider to be the most significant landing report in America that year. This case (No. 42 in the Condon Report) has been discussed in FSR<sup>5</sup> and elsewhere<sup>6</sup> and has intrigued me because of the witness's standing, a state trooper and ex-Marine, and because of its distinct similarity with other recent landing reports; in particular the landing at Americana, Brazil, less than a month before, which was also witnessed by a police officer.<sup>7</sup>

Members of the Condon Committee checked the site where the witness claimed to have observed the object hovering 8 to 10ft. off the ground for traces of radioactivity and could find none. They also claimed that they could find no evidence that an unusual object had hovered there.

I must confess ignorance as to what physical evidence, aside from radioactivity which would have been inconclusive at best, *could* have been left by a hovering object. Perhaps this is the reason why such objects are often reported to hover rather than touch down.

The case study of this report also fails to mention the extremely interesting details which were revealed when the witness was brought to Colorado and hypnotised before Condon and others by psychologist, and con-

sultant to APRO, Dr. Leo Sprinkle. These details make the report a quite extraordinary "contact". However the investigators chose to view the additional material in a different context.

The staff reportedly ended up with no confidence that the reported experience was physically real and the authenticity of the case remained unestablished in their eyes. This is a quite serious indictment of the trooper's ability to carry out his law enforcement duties and I believe it was unwarranted.

A trooper, even an ex-Marine, alone in a tiny rural town at 2.30 in the morning after having worked long hours could conceivably be subject to an hallucination. However when four other separate witnesses also report seeing an unusual object that night in that town, it becomes even more probable that the trooper did encounter a UFO. The Condon investigators apparently chose to ignore these separate reports as they preferred a subjective interpretation.

It is in significant cases such as this that the true incompetence of the Condon Committee is exposed. It also illustrates the limitations of a scientific investigation of a particular incident without recourse to correlative background data. This impression is further confirmed by the number of cases in which the Committee could suggest only a plausible explanation.

The study of the Phenomenon (especially in reports of landings) is to a certain degree interdisciplinary. This fact seems to have been realised only by those individual researchers such as Michel and Vallée who have examined a much wider spectrum of reports over the years than the Condon Committee's extremely limited perspective of a 2-year, comparatively weak, period.

### Vallée's prediction

In one sense the Phenomenon itself contributed to these limitations, as Dr. Jacques Vallée predicted when addressing the Committee members early in the study. According to Saunders<sup>8</sup> ". . . Vallée predicted that our investigation was likely to fail. He explained that by the time a wave of sightings has generated enough 'heat' to result in an investigation, the wave is ending. He pointed out that the life of our contract would span a period between sighting flaps because the crest of the current wave would already have passed."

Also interesting to note is that many of Vallée's suggestions were taken up by the Committee in its early stage (Condon was apparently impressed by Vallée) and serious consideration was given to inviting him to join the study. It was fortunate that his public position on UFOs prevented this, as he most certainly would have been "the loser" since the dice were loaded.

Perhaps the only way to read the Condon Committee Report is as a symposium of articles by individuals each with slightly varying viewpoints and perspectives. Parts of Condon's summation of the Report do not completely match the material in the other sections. There are "loopholes" in virtually every chapter.

Saunders reports<sup>9</sup> that members of the Committee had decided, at an early date, that to give credence and attempt to define the ETI (Extraterrestrial Intelligence) hypothesis would most likely result in an inconclusive finding since they would not be able to accurately

determine which aspects of the Phenomenon would lend support to this hypothesis.

Saunders also reports<sup>10</sup> that if the Committee ever did succeed in substantiating ETI Condon declared that he would take all such evidence and present it either to the President or the Air Force and let them decide what to do with it. In such a case the Committee's public commitment would not have been honoured.

In a recent interview Dr. J. Allen Hynek commented on other discrepancies in the Report,<sup>11</sup> "It is the judgment of Dr. Condon that the facts do not merit further investigation. The other contributors to the Report do not seem to bear out this judgment, and there is considerable hinting between the lines that there is something of great interest here."

### Attitudes and Recommendations

That some, perhaps most, of the members of the Committee were prejudiced toward a negative viewpoint is almost unquestionable, and, in my opinion, inevitable in any scientific body when dealing with a subject that has been so sensationalised.

If one can accept the basic sincerity of the study, then the Committee's great handicap, despite its scientific methodology, was its unfamiliarity with the intricacies of the subject. An ideal scientific investigative committee would be made up of individuals like Hynek, Vallée, McDonald (indeed even certain members of the Condon Committee now that they have acquired their ground-work) who have become thoroughly familiar with all aspects of the Phenomenon and know what to look for. Unfortunately here also is where preconceived notions might tend to enter the picture. However, there are methods of relegating the *personal factor* (the application of electronic computers being one method) to a point where it could not appreciably affect the outcome of the study.

One of the most negative and weakest contributions to the Report, aside from Dr. Condon's, is undoubtedly the chapter on "UFOs in History" (section V, cap. 1) which consists of a comparatively vulgar piece of journalism. It is, for the most part, a rehash of data from various sources, the author admitting that he was unable to uncover any independent material.

Saunders reports<sup>12</sup> that the author of this chapter was a long-time personal acquaintance of the project co-ordinator Robert Low, who hired him in one of his efforts to "build the record". This author, who refers to himself as a "trivialist", received \$3,200, an outrageous sum for this bit of "trivia".

### Spare the children

In what is sure to be one of the most controversial recommendations of the Report, it advises, quite strongly, that teachers refrain from giving their students credit for school work based on their reading UFO books and magazine articles,<sup>13</sup> and that the teachers who find students who express deep interest in the subject should attempt to channel their attention to more orthodox matters.

At first, I was quite shocked to discover how far the Committee had gone with this recommendation. They seemed to have clearly overstepped their bounds. However, on second reading, I could begin to comprehend

the Committee's rationalisation in this gesture. The Committee felt that the children would be educationally harmed by absorbing unsound and erroneous material on UFOs currently available in sensationalised presentations. There has been a virtual inundation of this type of literature on American news-stands since 1966. Paperback and pulp productions by overnight experts were the rule, not the exception. This readily available and cheaply produced material would naturally find an eager audience in children who had become interested in the subject.

Dr. Hynek has voiced his opinion of this recommendation "I don't believe that schoolchildren would be quite able to detect the 'signal' from the 'noise' in this subject. The investigation of a UFO report, properly carried out, would be a good lesson in scientific method. I would have to agree with the Condon Committee unless the study involved a critical investigation of an actual occurrence."<sup>11</sup>

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Saunders traces the history of Edward Uhler Condon's career from newspaper reporter in 1918 to Director of Colorado's Scientific Advisory Commission before tackling the subject of UFOs. We learn that considerable tension exists between Condon and newly-elected President Nixon stemming from the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (1947-54) in which Condon was maligned and persecuted.

Condon's emotional explosions when he learned of the release of the now-famous "trick" memo, written by Low, are vividly described by Saunders. In John Fuller's introduction to the Saunders book he notes that neither Condon nor Low had any comments when he gave them the opportunity to present their side of the matter before he published his exposé in the May 14, 1968, issue of *Look* magazine. The memo and the subsequent firings are merely glossed over by both Walter Sullivan and Condon in the Report itself,<sup>14</sup> and we seem to have a much clearer picture of the entire affair from Saunders' book without being unduly critical of Condon.

Saunders devotes a chapter to describing those cases in which Condon took a personal interest. They are without exception the most obvious hoaxes and delusions examined by the Committee.

This shows Condon in a very bad light. From this summary it seems as if Condon had never grasped, or possibly never even attempted to grasp, the magnitude of the Phenomenon. Since Condon wielded such a heavy hand in the direction of the project (he was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying "I raise a little hell when I run things") the whole investigation might have been titled "Condon's Folly" had it not been for the more

serious efforts by some of its members.

One receives the distinct impression that Condon may not have been quite "up to" the task of heading the high priority investigation (he devoted only half of his time to the study). One might wonder if the time has come when the good doctor is giving serious consideration to ending his colourful professional career.

### The End of an Era

The Condon Committee Report will take its place alongside the Warren Commission Report on the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy as an official document that attempted to dispel (justly or unjustly) the fears and probing questions in the public's mind. As such, it will probably trigger many more counter-documentaries just as the Warren Report has.

It is my considered belief, after examining the Condon Report quite thoroughly, that "history" will not treat it, *as a whole*, too harshly. I believe that when it is placed in its proper perspective as the *first* "official" attempt at scientifically evaluating the UFO Phenomenon, and when consideration is given to the pressures, both social and political, which were brought to bear on the study, it will become the *last* such "investigation". It will also signal the end of an era.

The Report is a "gold mine" of controversy. Condon himself has apparently realised this and has written a significant passage declaring that the Committee's conclusion that the study of UFOs has not enhanced scientific knowledge will not be uncritically accepted by scientists. He also states that if these scientists should come forward with ideas for a more accurate study, it will be because they have learned from the Committee's mistakes. This view may be open to question.

Saunders and Harkins' book is a fascinating in-depth critique that gives us a personal insight into the mechanics of the investigation.

I was most intrigued with Dr. Saunders' discussion of orthoteny, a study of which he conducted while still a member of the Committee. We should certainly hear more from Dr. Saunders and others like him.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *UFOs: They are not dead yet*, D. Zochert, "Chicago Daily News", January 28, 1969.
- <sup>2</sup> *While we wait*, Editorial, FSR, November/December 1968.
- <sup>3</sup> *Flying Saucer Occupants* by Jim and Coral Lorenzen, 1967.
- <sup>4</sup> *UFOs Over the Americas*, page 197.
- <sup>5</sup> FSR, July/August 1968, page 18.
- <sup>6</sup> *APRO Reporter* (Gribble), April 1968.
- <sup>7</sup> *APRO Bulletin* (Lorenzens), September/October 1968.
- <sup>8</sup> "UFOs? Yes!" Saunders and Harkins, page 61.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, page 77.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, pages 140-141.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with Dr. J. Allen Hynek over WCFL radio, January 26, 1969.
- <sup>12</sup> "UFOs? Yes!" page 131.
- <sup>13</sup> *Scientific Study of UFOs*, pages 5-6.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, xi and 541.

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**Unidentified Flying Objects**, Robert Chapman (*Arthur Barker Ltd.*)

**The Flying Saucer Story**, Brinsley le Poer Trench (*Spearman*)

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