

# Making It Unpopular:

## The CIA and UFOs in Popular Culture

- Adam Dodd
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It is time for the truth to be brought out ... . Behind the scenes high-ranking Air Force officers are soberly concerned about the UFOs. But through official secrecy and ridicule, many citizens are led to believe the unknown flying objects are nonsense. -- Rear Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, Director of Central Intelligence (1947-50), signed statement to Congress, 22 Aug. 1960

<sup>1</sup> As an avid [UFO](#) enthusiast, an enduring subject of frustration for me is the complacency and ignorance that tends to characterise public knowledge of the phenomenon itself and its social repercussions. Its hard for people like myself to understand how anyone could not be interested in UFOs, let alone Congressional statements from ex-Directors of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) testifying to an official policy of secrecy and ridicule (in other words, propaganda), which aims to suppress public interest and belief in UFOs.

<sup>2</sup> As a student of cultural studies who also happens to be a conspiracy theorist, the idea of the Central Intelligence Agency seeking to manipulate one of the twentieth century's most significant icons -- the UFO -- is a fascinating one, because it allows for the possibility that the ways in which the UFO has come to be understood by the public may involve more than the everyday cultural processes described by cultural studies. A review of the history of the CIA's interest in UFO phenomena actually suggests, quite compellingly I think, that since the 1950s, American culture (and, indirectly and to a lesser degree, the rest of the western world) may have been subjected to a highly sophisticated system of UFO propaganda that originated from the Central Intelligence Agency.

<sup>3</sup> This is, of course, a highly contentious claim which would bring many important repercussions should it turn out to be true. There is no point pretending that it doesn't sound like a basic premise of [The X-Files](#) -- of course it does. So to extract the idea from its comfortable fictional context and attempt to place it into a real historical one (a completely legitimate endeavour) one must become familiar with the politics of the UFO phenomenon in Cold War America, a field of history which is, to understate the matter, largely ignored by academia. A cursory glance at the thousands of (now declassified) UFO-related documents that once circulated through some of the highest channels of US intelligence reveal that, rather than the nonsense topic it is often considered, the UFO phenomenon has been a matter of great concern for the US government since 1947. To get a sense of just how seriously UFOs were taken by the CIA in the 1950s, consider this declassified 'Secret' memorandum from H. Marshall Chadwell, Assistant Director of Scientific Intelligence, to the Director of Central Intelligence, General Walter Bedell Smith, dated 24 September 1952:

<sup>4</sup> a world-wide reporting system has been instituted and major Air Force bases have been ordered to make interceptions of unidentified flying objects ... . Since 1947, ATIC [[Air Technical Intelligence Center](#), a branch of the US Air Force] has received approximately 1500 official reports of sightings ... . During 1952 alone, official reports totalled 250. Of the 1500 reports, Air Force carries 20 percent as unexplained and of those received from January through July 1952 it carries 28 percent as unexplained. (qtd. in Good 390)

<sup>5</sup> Fifteen-hundred reports in five years is roughly three-hundred reports per year, which is dangerously close to one per day. Although only twenty percent, or one-fifth of these reports were unexplained, equalling about 60 unexplained sightings per year, this still equalled more than one unexplained sighting per week. But these were just the unexplained, official sightings collected by ATIC, which was by no means a comprehensive database of all sightings occurring in the United States, or the rest of the world, for that matter. Extrapolation of these figures suggested that the UFO problem was probably much more extensive than the preliminary findings were indicating, hence the erection of a world-wide reporting system and the interception of UFOs by major US Air Force bases. The social consequences of the UFO problem quickly became a matter of major importance to the CIA. Chadwell went on to point out that:

<sup>6</sup> The public concern with the phenomena, which is reflected both in the United States press and in the pressure of inquiry upon the Air Force, indicates that a fair proportion of our population is mentally conditioned to the acceptance of the incredible. In this fact lies the potential for the touching-off of mass hysteria and panic. (qtd. in Good 393)

<sup>7</sup> By "acceptance of the incredible" Chadwell was probably referring to acceptance of the existence of intelligently controlled, disc-shaped craft which are capable of performing aerial manoeuvres far in excess of those possible with contemporary technology. Flying saucers were, and remain, incredible. Yet belief in them had permeated the US government as early as 1947, when a 'Secret' [Air Materiel Command](#) report (now declassified) from Lieutenant General Nathan Twining to the Commanding General, Army Air Forces, announced that:

It is the opinion that:

(a) The phenomenon reported is something real and not visionary and fictitious. There

are objects probably approximating the shape of a disc, of such appreciable size as to appear to be as large as man-made aircraft. There is a possibility that some of the incidents may be caused by natural phenomena, such as meteors.

(b) The reported operating characteristics such as extreme rates of climb, manoeuvrability (particularly in roll), and action which must be considered evasive when sighted or contacted by friendly aircraft or radar, lend belief to the possibility that some of the objects are controlled either manually, automatically, or remotely.

-- (qtd. in Good 313-4)

<sup>8</sup> This report was compiled only two months after the term flying saucer had been invented, following pilot Kenneth Arnold's historic sighting of nine saucer-like objects in June 1947. The fact that a phenomenon which should have been ignored as a tabloid fad was being confirmed, extremely quickly, by the Air Materiel Command Headquarters suggested that those people mentally conditioned to accept the impossible were not restricted to the public domain. They also, apparently, held positions of considerable power within the government itself. This rapid acceptance, at the highest levels of America's defense agencies, of the UFO reality must have convinced certain segments of the CIA that a form of hysteria had already begun, so powerful that those whose job it was to not only remain immune from such psychosocial forces, but to manage them, were actually succumbing to it themselves. What the CIA faced, then, was nothing short of a nation on the verge of believing in aliens.

<sup>9</sup> Considering this, it should become a little clearer why the CIA might develop an interest in the UFO phenomenon at this point. Whether aliens were here or not did not, ultimately, matter. What did matter was the obvious social phenomenon of UFO belief. Walter Bedell Smith, Director of Central Intelligence, realised this in 1952, and wrote to the Executive Secretary of the [National Security Council](#) (in a letter previously classified 'Secret'):

It is my view that this situation has possible implications for our national security which transcend the interests of a single service. A broader, coordinated effort should be initiated to develop a firm scientific understanding of the several phenomena which apparently are involved in these reports, and to assure ourselves that the incidents will not hamper our present efforts in the Cold War or confuse our early warning system in case of an attack. I therefore recommend that this Agency and the agencies of the [Department of Defense](#) be directed to formulate and carry out a program of intelligence and research activities required to solve the problem of instant positive identification of unidentified flying objects ... . This effort shall be coordinated with the military services and the Research and Development Board of the Department of Defense, with the Psychological Strategy Board and other Governmental agencies as appropriate. (qtd. in Good 400-1)

<sup>10</sup> What the Director was asserting, basically, was that the UFO problem was too big for the CIA to solve alone. Any government agencies it was deemed necessary to involve were to be called into action to deal with the UFOs. If this does not qualify UFOs as serious business, it is difficult to imagine what would.

<sup>11</sup> In the same year, Chadwell again reported to the CIA Director in a memo which suggests that he and his colleagues were on the brink of believing not only that UFOs were real, but that they represented an extraterrestrial presence:

At this time, the reports of incidents convince us that there is something going on that must have immediate attention ... . Sightings of unexplained objects at great altitudes and traveling at high speeds in the vicinity of major US defense installations are of such nature that they are not attributable to natural phenomena or known types of aerial vehicles. (qtd. in Good 403)

<sup>12</sup> In 1953, these concerns eventually led to the CIA's most public investigation of the UFO phenomenon, the [Robertson Panel](#). Its members were Dr H. P. Robertson (physics and radar); Dr Lloyd V. Berkner (geophysics); Dr Samuel Goudsmit (atomic structure and statistical problems); and Dr Thornton Page (astronomy and astrophysics). Associate members were Dr J. Allen Hynek (astronomy) and Frederick C. Durant (missiles and rockets). Twelve hours of meetings ensued (not nearly enough time to absorb all of the most compelling UFO data gathered at this point), during which the panel was shown films of UFOs, case histories and sightings prepared by the ATIC, and intelligence reports relating to the Soviet Union's interest in US sightings, as well as numerous charts depicting, for example, frequency and geographic location of sightings (Good 404). The report (not fully declassified until 1975) concluded with a highly skeptical, and highly ambiguous, view of UFO phenomena. Part IV, titled "Comments and Suggestions of the Panel", stated that:

Reasonable explanations could be suggested for most sightings ... by deduction and scientific method it could be induced (given additional data) that other cases might be explained in a similar manner. (qtd. in Good 404)

<sup>13</sup> However, even if the panel's insistence that UFOs were not of extraterrestrial origin seemed disingenuous, it still noted the subjectivity of the public to mass hysteria and greater vulnerability to possible enemy psychological warfare (qtd. in Good 405). To remedy this, it recommended quite a profound method of propaganda:

The debunking aim would result in reduction in public interest in flying saucers which today evokes a strong psychological reaction. This education could be accomplished by mass media such [as] television, motion pictures, and popular articles. Basis of such

education would be actual case histories which had been puzzling at first but later explained. As in the case of conjuring tricks, there is much less stimulation if the secret is known. Such a program should tend to reduce the current gullibility of the public and consequently their susceptibility to clever hostile propaganda. The panel noted that the general absence of Russian propaganda based on a subject with so many obvious possibilities for exploitation might indicate a possible Russian official policy ... . It was felt strongly that psychologists familiar with mass psychology should advise on the nature and extent of the program ... . It was believed that business clubs, high schools, colleges, and television stations would all be pleased to cooperate in the showing of documentary type motion pictures if prepared in an interesting manner. The use of true cases showing first the mystery and then the explanation would be forceful ... . The continued emphasis on the reporting of these phenomena does, in these parlous times, result in a threat to the orderly functioning of the protective organs of the body politic ... . [It is recommended that] the national security agencies take immediate steps to strip the Unidentified Flying Objects of the special status they have been given and the aura of mystery they have unfortunately acquired; that the national security agencies institute policies on intelligence, training, and public education designed to prepare the material defenses and the morale of the country to recognise most promptly and to react most effectively to true indications of hostile intent or action. We suggest that these aims may be achieved by an integrated program designed to reassure the public of the total lack of evidence of inimical forces behind the phenomena, to train personnel to recognize and reject false indications quickly and effectively, and to strengthen regular channels for the evaluation of and prompt reaction to true indications of hostile measures. (qtd. in Good 405-6)

<sup>14</sup> The general aim of the Robertson Panel's recommendations, then, was to not only stop people believing in UFOs, but to stop people seeing UFOs, which constitutes an extreme manipulation of the public consciousness. It was the intention of the CIA to ensure, as subtly as was possible, that most people interpreted specific visual experiences (i.e. UFO sightings) in terms of a strict CIA-developed criterion. This momentous act basically amounts to an attempt to define, control and enforce a particular construction of reality which specifically excludes UFOs.

<sup>15</sup> In an ironic way, the Robertson Panel report advocated a type of modern exorcism, and may have been the very birthplace of the idea that such an obvious icon of wonder and potential as the UFO is, it can never be more than a misidentification or a hoax. We cannot be certain to what extent the recommendations of the Robertson Panel were put into practice, but we can safely assume that its findings were not ignored by the CIA. For example, Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, Chief of the ATIC's Aerial Phenomena Branch, has testified that "[We were] ordered to hide sightings when possible, but if a strong report does get out, we have to publish a fast explanation -- make up something to kill the report in a hurry, and also ridicule the witnesses, especially if we can't find a plausible answer. We even have to discredit our own pilots" (Good 407). Comments like these make one wonder just how extensive the program of debunking and ridicule actually was.

<sup>16</sup> What I have suggested here is that during the 1950s, and possibly throughout the four decades since, an objective of the CIA has been to downplay its own interest in the UFO phenomenon to the public whilst engaging in secret, complex investigations of the phenomenon itself and its social repercussions. If this is the case, as the evidence -- the best of which can be found in the government's own files (even though such evidence, as tens of thousands of conspiracy theorists continue to stress, can hardly be taken simply at face value) -- indicates, then the construction of the UFO in western popular culture will have to be revised as a process involving more than just the projection of popular hopes, desires and anxieties onto an abstract, mythical object. It will also need to be seen as involving the clandestine manipulation of this process by immeasurably powerful groups within the culture itself, such as the CIA. And since the CIA's major concerns about UFOs have traditionally been explicitly related to the Cold War, the renewed prominence of the UFO in western popular culture since the demise of the Soviet Union requires immediate, serious investigation in a political context. For the UFO issue is, and has always been, a political issue. I suggest that until this fascinating chapter of American domestic history is explored more thoroughly, the cultural function of the UFO will remain just as poorly understood as its physical nature.

## References

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