

The Condon UFO Study: A Trick or a Conspiracy?

There was indeed a plot to mislead the public. Condon and Low were its victims.

Philip J. Klass

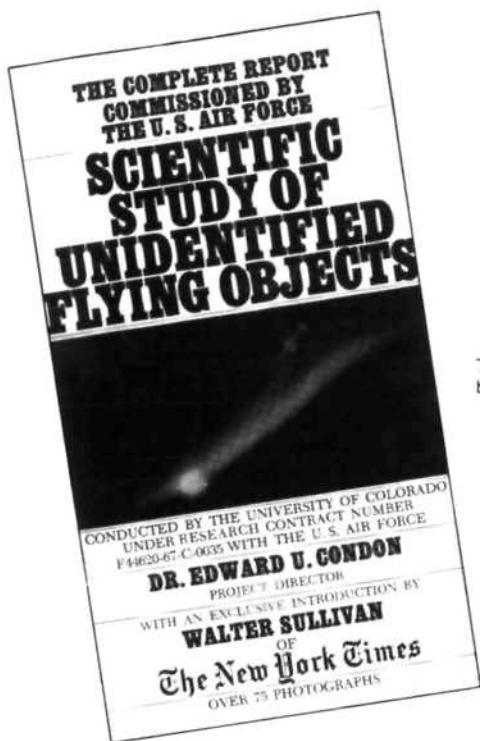
JUST 20 YEARS AGO, the University of Colorado undertook a very controversial project that was unique in the annals of university research. At the request of the U.S. government, the university agreed to perform a two-year scientific investigation into Unidentified Flying Objects—UFOs. That effort probably brought more fame to the University of Colorado—and certainly more criticism—than any other activity ever to take place on its campus.

The late Edward U. Condon, a world-famous physicist who once had directed the National Bureau of Standards with distinction and who was then a member of the Colorado faculty, reluctantly agreed to head the UFO project. He became a favorite whipping-boy of the UFO cultists. Robert Low, another faculty member, who served as the project coordinator and later died in an aircraft accident, was defamed in the national news media on the grounds that he and Condon had plotted to “trick” the American public.

There was indeed a plot to mislead the public. *But Condon and Low were its victims, not its architects.* A small group of “UFO-believers,” which included a U.S. congressman, secretly plotted to discredit the Colorado effort. Today we can piece together their covert actions because of fortuitous access to the files of the chief architect of the plot, who later committed suicide.

Let me emphasize that I cannot endorse the Colorado investigation as having been well managed. In my opinion, Condon himself did not play a sufficiently active role, and Low had no prior experience in coordinating so complex an investigation. But under the circumstances, I doubt that anyone could have done much better. And those who later plotted to discredit the

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The Condon Report, as published by Bantam.

Colorado effort would surely have done far worse had they directed the program.

But first let us turn back the clock to the spring of 1966 for the benefit of those who are too young to recall the circumstances and for those whose memories have dimmed because of the passage of two decades.

By the spring of 1966, the U.S. Air Force had been investigating UFO reports for nearly 20 years—more than 10,000 of them. At first there were some within the USAF who suspected that some UFO reports might involve extraterrestrial spacecraft, or possibly Soviet reconnaissance vehicles, perhaps built with advanced technology obtained from German scientists captured at the end of World War II.

But, by the early 1950s, having learned that many seemingly mysterious UFO reports had been generated by prosaic trigger-mechanisms, such as bright celestial bodies, weather balloons, and meteor-fireballs, the USAF concluded that all UFO reports were explainable in prosaic terms. And so the USAF assigned only low-level personnel—many of them without appropriate training—to investigate UFO reports. Thus it is not surprising that in some instances these relatively unskilled investigators had trouble finding rational explanations and that there remained a small percentage of unex-

plained cases. For those eager to believe in alien spaceships, these unexplained cases seemed to be proof of their fondest hopes.

Sometimes USAF investigators offered explanations that evoked sharp criticism, and with good reason. For example, in March 1966, UFO reports from university students and others in southern Michigan attracted national attention after the USAF's investigator—astronomer J. Allen Hynek—suggested that some of the reports might be due to swamp-gas. This explanation aroused much ridicule and criticism, even from some members of Congress, including a then obscure Michigan congressman named Gerald Ford.

This criticism of the USAF's handling of the UFO issue and charges that it was guilty of a coverup prompted the USAF's scientific advisory board to recommend that an independent UFO study be conducted by one or more universities. But, when well-known scientific institutions like MIT were sounded out, none of them was willing to undertake such an effort.

During the late spring and early summer of 1966, as the USAF struggled to find a prestigious scientist and institution willing to tackle the UFO study, a member of the faculty of the University of Arizona was lobbying to obtain the contract. His name was James E. McDonald, an atmospheric physicist who was respected by his peers. There was, however, a basic obstacle for McDonald. *He already was convinced that some UFOs were extraterrestrial craft.* This clearly made it impossible for him to direct or conduct an independent, unbiased investigation.

Condon, who had earlier served as president of the American Physical Society and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and was a member of the respected National Academy of Sciences, had recently joined the Colorado faculty to devote his later years to research in atomic physics.

Robert Low, then assistant dean of the Colorado graduate school, was considerably younger than Condon. He recognized the potential pitfalls of the UFO investigation, but he believed that the project offered the university the opportunity to achieve wider recognition as a center of scientific excellence and that it could be a useful stepping stone in his own academic career. Events would prove Low to be wrong on both counts.

After weeks of internal debate over whether to take on the program, the university submitted its formal proposal in early October 1966, and on October 7 the USAF announced that Colorado had been selected. A key proviso in the Colorado proposal, which was included in its contract, was the following: "The work will be conducted under conditions of strictest objectivity by investigators who, as carefully as can be determined, have no predilections or preconceived positions on the UFO question." (Emphasis added.)

This was a vitally important condition, because the Colorado group would sit in scientific judgment, much as a jury in a court of law, whose members must swear that they have no prior view on the issues under trial. I suspect, but have no proof, that this proviso was intended to foreclose any direct

participation by McDonald. The University of Colorado subsequently awarded subcontracts to several outside institutions and specialists, but none ever went to McDonald.

However, this key provision was violated immediately when David R. Saunders joined the project as one of its three top scientists—referred to as “principal investigators.” Saunders was a member of the university’s psychology faculty, but it soon became quite evident that Saunders was at least a “quasi-believer,” as one of the younger scientists in the project soon characterized him to his face.

Saunders subsequently acknowledged publicly that he had become interested in UFOs at least several months before the USAF contract was awarded. After reading a best-selling “gee-whiz” type book titled *UFOs—Serious Business*, written by a strongly pro-UFO author, Saunders had visited the headquarters of the National Investigations Committee of Aerial Phenomena (NICAP)—then the nation’s largest group of UFO believers—to meet with officials and to join the organization.

It was Saunders who played the key role in getting Condon and Low to agree—using Saunders’s own words—that “we ought to concentrate on trying to identify and develop cases that might support the extraterrestrial intelligence hypothesis.”¹ Saunders also embraced the cornerstone of the UFO-believers’ faith that the U.S. government was involved in a UFO coverup. As Saunders later wrote: “Almost from the first day of the Project, I had maintained that a ‘government conspiracy’ to conceal the ‘truth about UFOs’ from the public was an even more likely hypothesis than ETI.”²

Saunders was well aware of the provision against hiring investigators who had any “predilections or preconceived positions on the UFO question” contained in the USAF contract and the university proposal, because Saunders himself had participated in writing that proposal. Yet he did not disqualify himself from participation on those grounds.

Condon and Low tried to establish a good working relationship with NICAP officials from the beginning. NICAP director Donald Keyhoe and assistant director Richard Hall accepted an invitation in the fall of 1966 to visit Boulder to brief project scientists. Following this meeting, NICAP officials offered a curious endorsement of Condon and his associates in the January-February 1967 issue of the NICAP publication, *The UFO Investigator*. The article said: “It probably is fair to say that the scientists on the project range from open-minded skeptics to *moderately convinced believers*—which is as it should be.” (Emphasis added.)

While NICAP officials clearly were pleased to find “moderately convinced believers” on the Colorado project shortly after the investigation began, if their assessment was correct, then the terms of the USAF contract had been violated.

McDonald also was invited to Boulder in the fall of 1966 to brief the Colorado team. He returned again in the summer of 1967 to brief the project scientists on the results of his own investigations into UFO reports from

Australia and New Guinea. But, beyond this, Condon and Low did not avail themselves of McDonald's frequent offers to become more directly involved in the investigation.

J. Allen Hynek also was invited to come to Boulder to brief its team on his own views about UFOs. But the then leading experienced UFO-skeptic, the late astronomer Donald Menzel, was never invited to visit Boulder. Nor was I, although I had offered my services as a consultant early in the program.

In June 1967, about halfway through the investigation, the Colorado team was joined by Norman E. Levine, who had just received his Ph.D. in electrical engineering from the University of Arizona. Levine publicly acknowledged that his own interest in UFOs had been sparked by McDonald. Shortly after Levine joined the staff, I happened to talk with him on the telephone when I placed a call to Low, who was out of town. During the discussion, I was shocked to hear Levine express views on UFOs that were remarkably similar to those voiced by McDonald, especially since Levine had just joined the project.

The Colorado game-plan was to dispatch a small team of scientists to investigate important UFO-sighting reports. To ensure that these were promptly reported to the project, an "early warning network" of several dozen persons around the nation was created, consisting principally of NICAP's own field investigators. Shortly after Levine joined the project, he was named "secretary" of the field investigators to coordinate their efforts. As a result, Levine and Saunders played key roles in determining which UFO reports deserved field investigation.

On September 4, 1967, nearly a year after the investigation began, Saunders spoke before the American Psychological Association at its annual meeting in Washington, as a member of a panel during a session on UFOs. During the question-and-answer period, Saunders was asked: "What is your opinion of the scientific integrity of the Condon Committee?" Saunders replied: "... I would not wish to remain associated with anything but an open and impartial investigation."³ Considering Saunders's own pro-UFO views and the key role that he and Levine were playing in the project, his answer is hardly surprising. He remained with the project until the following February 7, when he was fired, along with Levine.

Saunders chose not to reveal to the APA meeting that he was somewhat unhappy with Condon and Low because a few weeks earlier they had rejected two of his suggestions. One of these was that the project should not wait to make its final report before "going public" with some of its interim case-investigation results. Saunders wanted to release those that he believed supported the extraterrestrial hypothesis as well as those that did not.

Saunders's second suggestion was that the Colorado project should encourage public discussion "of the social problems that the world would have to face if either our study or some future study were to generate conclusive evidence of extraterrestrial visitations."⁴

The decision by Condon and Low to reject these two suggestions was a

very wise one at the time, and certainly in retrospect. Condon, and the project, had been criticized earlier—with good reason—because of several speeches Condon had given early in the effort in which he revealed his strong skepticism about UFOs' being extraterrestrial visitors. As a result, the decision had been made to hold back further public discussion until the final report was issued. Saunders himself had violated that policy by agreeing to speak to the APA without obtaining advanced approval to do so.

Were it not for McDonald's tragic suicide in June 1971 and the fact that a young graduate student named Paul McCarthy, at the University of Hawaii, decided to write his Ph.D. thesis on the UFO controversy, the world would never have known of the covert effort spearheaded by McDonald to torpedo the credibility of the Colorado investigation.

Young McCarthy, who honestly characterized himself as being a "UFO-believer," obtained permission from McDonald's widow to gain access to all of his personal papers. Because of McCarthy's strong pro-UFO views and his understandable sympathies for McDonald in the wake of his tragic death, it seems likely that McCarthy left out at least some "incriminating evidence" from his thesis, completed in late 1975. But there is enough to piece together the curious puzzle.

McDonald had himself become such a fanatical believer in UFOs' being alien craft and the greatest scientific mystery of this century that at first he was certain the Colorado group would reach the same conclusion. If it did, then almost certainly the government would then authorize a massive followup UFO investigation, which McDonald would be the logical person to direct because of his expertise. Condon and Low indicated no interest in conducting followup studies. But if Condon and Low remained unconvinced and the two project leaders reached a "negative" conclusion, then McDonald's ambitions would be dashed.

From McCarthy's thesis we learn that, when McDonald returned from Boulder in early August 1967, after briefing the Colorado team on the results of his own UFO-case investigations in Australia, he was discouraged. McDonald so indicated in his letter of August 11, 1967, to Mary Lou Armstrong, administrative assistant to the project. In McCarthy's thesis he notes: "McDonald could talk and write openly to Armstrong and a few others, although Condon and Low, the leaders, remained at a distance."⁵

It was at about the same time—August 1967—that a member of the project, believed to have been Mrs. Armstrong, discovered a memo that had been written a year earlier by Robert Low. In this memo, dated August 9, 1966, Low expressed his *personal ideas* on whether the university should take on the UFO study. By late April 1968, the contents of this memo would be the cornerstone of a feature article in *Look* magazine charging that the Colorado investigation was "a half-million dollar 'trick' to make Americans believe the Condon committee was conducting an objective investigation."

The *Look* article was written by John G. Fuller, who earlier had authored two pro-UFO books. Later, Fuller wrote a book endorsing a famous South

American “psychic surgeon,” and still later a book claiming that some Eastern Air Lines jetliners were haunted by the ghosts of members of a flight crew killed in a tragic accident.

As we consider the contents of Low’s memo, we should remember that it was written at a time when there was strong disagreement among faculty members over whether the university should undertake the effort. Low’s memo, entitled “Some Thoughts on the UFO Project,” was addressed to E. James Archer, dean of the graduate school, and to Thurston E. Manning, vice-president for academic affairs.

His memo noted that those who opposed university involvement felt that “to undertake such a project one has to approach it objectively. That is, one has to admit the possibility that such things as UFOs exist. It is not respectable to give serious consideration to such a possibility. Believers, in other words, remain outcasts.” But Low quoted another scientist at a separate research center in Boulder, who favored taking on the project, saying: “We must do it right—objectively and critically . . . having the project here would not put us in the category of scientific kooks.”

Low’s memo drew an analogy with the ESP experiments that had been conducted in the 1930s by J. B. Rhine at Duke University. Low noted that “the Duke study was done by believers who, after they finished, convinced no one. Our study would be conducted almost exclusively by non-believers who, although they couldn’t possibly prove a negative result, could and probably would add an impressive body of evidence that there is no reality to the observations.”

Then followed the sentence that later would prove so embarrassing. Low wrote: “The *trick* would be, I think, to describe the project so that, to the public, it would appear a totally objective study, but to the scientific community would present the image of a group of non-believers trying their best to be objective but having an almost zero expectation of finding a saucer.” (Emphasis added.)

For most Americans, the word *trick* has a devious meaning, but according to the *Randon House Dictionary of the English Language* “trick” also means “the art or knack of doing something skillfully.” That is a meaning more often used by the British and members of the British Commonwealth.

For example, in early 1978, Canadian and U.S. scientists were trying to locate radioactive debris from a Soviet satellite that had reentered prematurely over Canada’s Northwest Territories. A United Press International article on the incident quoted a Canadian scientist, named Jack Doyle, as saying: “The *trick* at the moment is to convert blips on our [instrument] tapes to something we can see on the ground.” (Emphasis added.) Robert Low had studied at Oxford University and, during our brief meeting in Washington, I noticed that he had acquired some British speech affectations and word usages. But I acknowledge that it is not possible today to know for sure what meaning he intended in his now infamous memo.

The important thing, however, is whether Saunders and McDonald were

'Condon, the True Scientist, Understood Self-Deception'

Useful insights into the controversy that swirled around the University of Colorado UFO study are offered by Lewis M. Branscomb, chief scientist and vice president of IBM, who in the mid-1960s was chairman of the Joint Institute for Laboratory Astrophysics (JILA) on the university's Boulder campus. Branscomb knew well both Edward U. Condon, who directed the UFO study, and Robert Low, the project administrator. A copy of the accompanying article was submitted to Dr. Branscomb for comments and his response included the following:

"I know first hand that Bob Low did indeed use the word 'trick' in the sense you defined . . . Scientists, American as well as British, frequently use it to mean a clever or ingenious solution to a problem. The word 'scheme' has a similar ambiguity. (That episode taught me a lesson, and I have avoided using 'trick' in that sense.) . . .

"Condon originally requested that the UFO project be undertaken within JILA, and the proposition was debated by the Fellows. We declined, in part because . . . Condon declined to put in place a set of committed procedures and safeguards that we felt would be necessary to preserve the integrity of so controversial a project. . . . Some of us were concerned that he trusted too many people and might well be victimized, as indeed happened. . . .

"I remember, vividly, a long discussion with Ed Condon in his office . . . when he was considering taking the [UFO] project on. He told me he thought the chances that he could find evidence for a UFO of extraterrestrial origin was infinitesimal, a million-to-one-shot. 'But,' he said with the gleam in the eye that betrays a true scientist on the track of remarkable discovery, 'if there is a chance, even the most remote chance that there is something there, I want to be the one to discover it.'

"In that sense, he and McDonald shared the same motivation, coming from opposite intellectual traditions. Each of them wanted a shot at the immortality that would come from the most astonishing discovery in human history. Unlike McDonald, however, Condon, the true scientist, understood self-deception. The stronger the incentive to discover, the greater the temptation to let down one's guard," Dr. Branscomb noted.

— P.J.K.

surprised and shocked when they first read the memo and concluded that Low and Condon had resorted to devious skullduggery. According to the book that Saunders later wrote, he was neither shocked nor surprised, because the memo "did *not* say anything new—it merely expressed concisely what we

knew anyway on the basis of Low's day-to-day behavior."⁶ If Saunders believed at the time that Low's memo offered evidence of skullduggery, he could, and should, have mentioned it several weeks later when he met with vice-president Manning to complain because Condon and Low had rejected his two suggestions. *Yet Saunders did not even mention the Low memo to Manning.*

It is not known with certainty when McDonald first learned of the Low memo. Based on his very close relationship with Levine and Mrs. Armstrong, both of whom saw the memo in August 1967, it would be logical to expect that they had promptly informed McDonald.

Around mid-September 1967, Condon spoke on UFOs at the Atomic Spectroscopy Symposium at the National Bureau of Standards. Condon focused on humorous cases, such as those involving persons he had interviewed who claimed to have made contact with UFOnuts, as well as some incidents that had been exposed as hoaxes. McDonald was especially disturbed by Condon's remarks and wrote to Low to complain, but received no reply.

According to McCarthy's thesis, "Condon's National Bureau of Standards talk was apparently a turning point, for after that McDonald met with Saunders and Levine in early November and talked of engineering a confrontation."⁷

On December 12, 1967, Saunders, Levine, and Armstrong met secretly in Denver with McDonald and Hynek. According to Saunders's book, "McDonald's chief interest was the publication of a newsletter which might later grow into a scientific journal. Hynek wanted to create a visible group of qualified individuals who took the UFO problem seriously, so that in the event of a Congressional hearing, there would exist an organization to which the Congress could turn."⁸

According to Saunders's account, "Hynek had had a cold and excused himself from our meeting early. After he left, McDonald brought up Low's controversial 'trick' memo. We were surprised that he knew anything about it. McDonald said that [NICAP's] Keyhoe had told him about it." Saunders went on to explain that he "had allowed Keyhoe to copy the memo on the day before Thanksgiving and had encouraged him to share the memo with members of NICAP's Board of Directors."

There is reason to question the foregoing Saunders account on at least one score—that he, Levine, and Armstrong were surprised that McDonald knew anything about the Low memo. Recall McCarthy's thesis statement that, at the time the Low memo was discovered, McDonald was covertly communicating with Armstrong and others in the Colorado project.

On December 28, 1967, barely two weeks after the secret meeting in Denver, McDonald wrote a leading French UFOlogist saying that he was "disappointed and disillusioned with Condon." McDonald added that "some confrontation is going to have to be effected. This is difficult to engineer. A number of us are working on that problem."⁹ If McDonald wanted a confron-

tation, he need only have flown to Boulder and met with Condon and Low. What McDonald really wanted was to discredit the Colorado effort.

The coming months, as McCarthy wrote in his thesis, brought "the confrontation which McDonald desired. He played the major role in this episode, which turned on the infamous 'Low memo.'"¹⁰

On January 31, 1968, McDonald wrote a long letter to Low in which he criticized the conduct of the Colorado investigation. In his letter McDonald revealed that he had seen a copy of the Low memo and quoted portions of it verbatim. Interestingly, McDonald did not claim that he had been shocked by the contents of Low's memo, but said he was "rather puzzled by the viewpoints expressed there."¹¹

McDonald's letter was buried in a stack of mail waiting for Low on his return trip. Mrs. Armstrong finally brought it to his attention on February 6. The next day, when Condon met with Saunders and Levine and they admitted having given a copy of the memo to McDonald, Condon fired both men. Shortly afterward Mrs. Armstrong resigned.

On February 9, McDonald sent a copy of the Low memo to the president of the National Academy of Sciences, which had agreed to review the Colorado study's final report. Two days later, McDonald also sent a copy of the memo to James Hughes, Office of Naval Research. Hughes was the contract monitor for several atmospheric research contracts the Navy had awarded to McDonald, and McDonald had covertly used these research funds for his UFO investigations and travels, with Hughes's tacit approval.

McDonald explained that he wanted to keep Hughes informed on the UFO scene in expectation of the time when he would formally seek Navy funds for UFO research, rather than bootlegging these activities. Not surprisingly, McDonald warned Hughes not to discuss such "explosive material" in letters sent to his office and that any discussion of these matters should be sent to McDonald's home.¹²

On April 30, 1968, coincident with the publication of Fuller's article in the May 14 issue of *Look* magazine, NICAP held a press conference in Washington to denounce the Low memo and the Colorado investigation. During the question-and-answer period, I asked NICAP director Keyhoe, "What would you do if one of your employees were to go through your files and take certain papers out and send them to me, or to the Air Force, without your knowledge?" Keyhoe replied: "I'd probably fire him. I'd take a dim view of the disloyalty, not the papers."

When Keyhoe sharply criticized Condon for failing to make field investigations of UFO cases, I asked Keyhoe: "How many field investigations have you made in the past year?" Keyhoe replied: "About five and I made a great many by telephone." When I asked him to identify the five cases he investigated, Keyhoe replied: "Three of them I don't care to mention because one of them, one group consists of sightings the Air Force did not report to Condon." I then responded: "Well, could you mention the [other] two you did investigate?" Keyhoe declined to answer.

On the very same day that *Look* hit the stands and NICAP held its press conference, Congressman J. Edward Roush (D.-Ind.) took to the floor of the House to denounce the Colorado investigation. Roush said: "There is a strong indication that the Colorado project will be known as the \$500,000 fiasco. At the very least, grave doubts have arisen as to the scientific profundity and objectivity of the Colorado project." Roush urged that the USAF be relieved of its responsibility for investigating UFOs and that the job be turned over to the Congress!

Thanks to McCarthy's thesis, we now know that Roush's speech on the floor was part of McDonald's cleverly orchestrated plan. More than a year before, only several months after the Colorado investigation had begun, McDonald contacted Congressman Roush when he visited Tucson. And on March 3, 1967, McDonald wrote to Roush to "push for Congressional hearings" on UFOs.¹³ McDonald continued to write Roush to urge him to hold these hearings. But, in late 1967, Roush replied that, while he too favored Congressional hearings on UFOs, he thought they should be deferred until the Colorado study was completed.

Three months after the *Look* article was published and after Roush had denounced the Colorado effort, he arranged for the House Science and Astronautics Committee (of which he was a member) to hold a one-day "UFO symposium." It was characterized as a symposium rather than a hearing for good reason. Five of the six scientists invited to testify, including McDonald and Hynek, were strongly pro-UFO. The sixth, Carl Sagan, at the time was mildly pro-UFO. (Sagan since has become a UFO-skeptic.)

Thanks to McCarthy's thesis, we now know that Roush allowed McDonald to select the six scientists invited to testify. McDonald used Roush's office as his base of operations and was authorized to use the congressman's telephone credit-card for long-distance calls made outside Roush's office. Roush's very one-sided UFO symposium provided grist for the mill of author John G. Fuller, who promptly produced a paperback book, entitled *Aliens in the Skies: The New UFO Battle of the Scientists*, consisting largely of pro-UFO testimony presented at Roush's symposium. The book provided still another opportunity to browbeat Condon, Low, and the University of Colorado.

In November 1968, Congressman Roush was defeated at the polls. Shortly thereafter he was named to NICAP's board of directors.

The *Look* article, the NICAP press conference, and Congressman Roush's denunciation of the Colorado investigation, together with the publication of the book by Saunders and Harkins, occurred many months before the final report on the Colorado effort was made public, in early 1969.

In one of the several sections of the final report authored by Condon himself, he said he had not been aware of the controversial Low memo until it burst into public view. He noted that Low's memo represented "at most, preliminary 'thinking out loud' about the proposed project by an individual having no authority to make formal decisions."¹⁴

More important, Condon pointed out that one of Low's key recommendations in his memo, that the investigation focus on the psychology of people who report UFOs rather than investigate the phenomenon itself, was "exactly contrary to the procedure actually followed by the project." Condon added: "It should be evident to anyone perusing this final report, that the emphasis was placed where, in my judgment, it belonged: on the investigation of physical phenomena, rather than psychological or sociological matters."¹⁵

Condon could have added—but probably was too embarrassed to do so—that, if he and Low had wanted to conspire to create false impressions, then Condon would never have given his several public speeches expressing his strong skepticism about UFOs.

During the two years following publication of the Condon Report, as it is now known, until McDonald's tragic death, McDonald continued to give pro-UFO lectures to scientific groups around the country. I heard, or obtained copies, of many of those talks. *Never once did McDonald raise the issue of the "trick" memo in his talks before scientific groups.* Apparently he realized that Low's memo had served its purpose, to blacken the names of Condon, Low, and the University of Colorado in the public eye, and would carry no weight-of-argument among scientists.

Instead, McDonald chose to criticize the Colorado effort on the grounds that there were a number of UFO cases for which the team was *not* able to find rational, prosaic explanations. The same criticism is voiced today. Yet the fact that there were unexplained UFO cases demonstrates that the Colorado project did not avoid tackling challenging incidents. And the fact that these were published in the Colorado report shows that there was no attempt at coverup or censorship. In other words, contrary to the impression conveyed to large segments of the public by McDonald's well-orchestrated campaign, Condon and Low did not resort to skullduggery.

But what about those unexplained cases? One McDonald found especially impressive involved the crew of a USAF RB-47 electronic reconnaissance aircraft on a night training-mission over the Gulf states. The Colorado team was handicapped in investigating this case because, when the pilot brought the case to the attention of Colorado investigators, he provided an incorrect date and the Colorado investigators were not able to locate original files and reports.

Later, when McDonald managed to locate the original files, I myself tackled this case and found it one of the most challenging I had ever undertaken. It required many hundreds of hours of effort, including locating 20-year-old data on the antenna radiation pattern of an old radar and the schematic diagram for a decade-old electronic intelligence system. After a lot of work, and with a lot of luck, I was able to develop a prosaic explanation that was endorsed both by the RB-47 pilot and by the electronic intelligence (Elint) operator whose equipment was involved.¹⁶

Another decade-old UFO incident that had occurred in England also went unexplained in the Condon Report. My own lengthy investigation

developed a prosaic explanation.¹⁷ I suspect that the young scientist assigned to this case overlooked potential prosaic explanations because he was too eager to believe that some UFOs were extraterrestrial spaceships.

Still another of the unexplained cases in the Condon Report involved two photos of a UFO that resembled an inverted pie-tin. The young scientist who investigated this case, and who has since become a well-known planetary scientist, was simply too credulous in accepting statements from seemingly honest farm folk. Later, this scientist revised his original view and concluded the photos were a hoax after considering evidence developed by Robert Sheaffer and my analysis.

All three of the unexplained cases in the Condon Report that I investigated proved to have prosaic explanations. I am confident that the others do also.

There are important lessons to be learned from the University of Colorado project. They are especially important if the U.S. government should ever decide to fund a scientific investigation into other claims of the paranormal, such as parapsychology.

If the government did decide to fund an investigation into parapsychology, for instance, who could be expected to volunteer for the effort? The most eager volunteers would be those scientists who already are investigating psi. Most, if not all, of them believe that psi exists or they would not be devoting their careers to the subject. But clearly this disqualifies them as impartial researchers.

What *experienced* scientist would volunteer to even temporarily abandon his or her present career in a field that seems promising for one that seems to be a pseudoscientific dead-end? The bulk of the volunteers for such a project would be young, inexperienced scientists who would hope to become pioneers in a new field with profound implications. These young researchers would be hopeful of discovering evidence early in their careers that could make them famous. And it is this attitude that could make them vulnerable to becoming victims of self-delusion and ambition.

In retrospect, it is clear to me that at least some, if not many, of the young researchers who volunteered for the University of Colorado UFO investigation had what might be called "UFO-stars-in-their-eyes" hopes and ambitions. There is no hard evidence to show that they were as strongly pro-UFO as Saunders and Levine, but considerable circumstantial evidence to suggest that at least several of the young scientists were not as skeptical as they should have been.

Another criticism I would level at the Colorado project is that it undertook to investigate too many old UFO cases. The older the UFO incident, the more difficult it is to obtain the necessary hard data and the more flawed will be the recollections of those who were involved. Yet, if Condon and Low had opted to focus on current UFO cases, their critics would have accused them of ignoring the most impressive data.

If there had been UFO reports *only* during the late 1940s and the 1950s and none thereafter, the Colorado investigators would have had no choice

but to investigate the old incidents. But UFOs were a continuing, ongoing phenomenon, with many hundreds of recent cases and many dozens that occurred while the Colorado investigation was in progress. These current cases could be considered a representative sample of the phenomena, and the Colorado investigators should have focused their principle energies on these incidents. But I acknowledge that this is the wisdom of hindsight.

In summary: Under the difficult circumstances, Condon and Low probably did as good a job as was possible, especially considering that one of the three principal investigators already was at least a quasi-believer before the effort got under way.

One thing is now certain, however. The late Edward Condon, Robert Low, and the good name of the University of Colorado all were victims of a well-orchestrated plot to discredit them—a plot whose outlines would still be unknown but for the tragic death of its principal architect and the efforts of an enterprising Ph.D. candidate.

Condon's own brief comments on the skullduggery that occurred, contained in the final report, are illuminating: "I had some awareness of the passionate controversy that swirled around the subject, contributing added difficulty to the task of making a dispassionate study. . . . Had I known of the extent of the emotional commitment of the UFO believers and the extremes of conduct to which their faith can lead them, I certainly would never have undertaken the study."¹⁹

Notes

1. *UFOs? Yes!—Where the Condon Committee Went Wrong*, by David R. Saunders and R. Roger Harkins (Signet Books), p. 81.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
5. "Politicking and Paradigm Shifting: James E. McDonald and the UFO Case Study," a Ph.D. thesis by Paul McCarthy, University of Hawaii, 1975, p. 137.
6. Saunders and Harkins, p. 134.
7. McCarthy, p. 170a.
8. Saunders and Harkins, p. 179.
9. McCarthy, p. 142.
10. Saunders and Harkins, p. 249.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
12. McCarthy, p. 145.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
14. *Final Report of the Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects* (Bantam), p. 549.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 549.
16. *UFOs Explained*, by Philip J. Klass (Random House), Chapters 19 and 20.
17. *Ibid.*, Chapter 21.
18. *Ibid.*, Chapter 15.
19. *Final Report of the Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects*, p. 548. •