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UFO Buffs Say Respect Is Replacing Ridicule

By Marlise Simons

ACAPULCO, Mexico — After years of being mocked by science, governments and the media, serious researchers of unidentified flying objects are seeing signs that "UFOlogy" may finally be coming out of the scientific closet and gaining some respectability.

UFO researchers attending the First International Congress on the UFO Phenomenon say that more and more scientists, including numerous members of the prestigious American Astronomical Society, are becoming interested.

The few reputable scientists who admit to studying UFO reports say they have had to walk a tightrope between keeping their reputation as men of science and being dismissed as fools.

But while they stay far away from popular theories like "little green men from other planets" and leave the UFO origins wide open, they maintain that there is increasing hard evidence of recurrent, worldwide events that cannot be explained conventionally. The question, they say, is not "is it real," but how, through which discipline—astronomy, psychology, physics or social science—the phenomenon must be examined.

"People are beginning to recognize there are serious aspects to this, that trivial solutions like 'meteorological effects' no longer wash," said Dr. J. Allen Hynek, director of the Lindhelmer astronomical research center of Northwestern University. Hynek, who has spent nearly 30 years in UFO research, is regarded as one of the foremost U.S. authorities.

"The scientific party line on UFOs has always been if you can't put it in an equation, to hell with it," Hynek said. "But UFOs just haven't gone away. It hasn't been a fad. On the contrary, reports of sightings are on the increase. It's a case of the scientists following the public."

Hynek and several of his colleagues have been receiving a growing number of letters from astronomers, physicists and engineers asking to participate in research projects.

"They aren't looking for jobs but keen to get involved, although they still ask that I don't mention their names," said Hynek, who himself "only recently began admitting at cocktail parties that I work in UFOlogy."

UFOlogists have been much heartened by a recent confidential survey among the 2,611 members of the

rate of response is 52 per cent. In their replies, 53 per cent said that UFOs are worthy of further study while 75 per cent said that they would like to receive documentation.

The old fear of ridicule persists, however: Of the 1,356 scientists responding, only two were willing to waive anonymity.

The conference-goers, some 250 persons from 16 nations, included many UFO "cultists," that is, believers in past and present visitors from outer space whose mission is either to threaten or to enlighten us earthlings.

But despite such individual speculation—"fantastic guff that muddies the waters," as an American engineer said angrily—much evidence of a world wide shift in attitude was presented at the conference.

• In November, Spain's air ministry released previously classified details of 13 recent UFO sightings by military pilots and radar personnel.

• A former French defense minister, Robert Galley, has urged keeping an "open mind" about UFOs. French air force and police, Galley said, are under orders to follow up on all reported sightings and send samples of affected soil or plants to the national center for space research.

• In the Netherlands, military and police have agreed to work closely with scientists investigating reports.

In the United States, where a 1973 Gallup poll found that 51 per cent of the population believes in the UFO phenomenon, researchers complain that the government is decidedly uncooperative. Some even denounced a deliberate "coverup."

William Spaulding, director of a research organization called Ground Saucer Watch, charged: "While the Central Intelligence Agency says it has not worked on UFOs since 1953, we have evidence that all four CIA directorates have collected, analyzed and suppressed UFO data in 21 American cities."

"The CIA has tried to strip UFOs of their prominence," continued Spaulding, who claims to have information from former CIA personnel. "They are doing strange things. For example, we know of 50 CIA memos on the use of the UFO subject in psychological warfare," he said.

The U.S. government's last official word on UFOs, the officially sponsored Robertson panel and the Condon report, were branded at the conference "deliberate white washes of a real problem."

Hynek, who acted as consultant to the U.S. Air Force on its project "Blue Book"—recording sightings of UFOs between 1952 and 1969—said "Blue Book" was a mere "public-relations effort designed to debunk the whole thing." Too many cases came up, said Hynek, "of military pilots who told me they had their film confiscated, were debriefed and told not to take it seriously or discuss it further."

Yet more than blaming governments for the retarded state of their research, investigators here cited ridicule as the most formidable obstacle.

French astrophysicist Jacques Vallee said that while tracking satellites at the Paris observatory, a lengthy tape was made of a moving object "that was not supposed to be there."

"Afterwards," Vallee said, "the leader of our group destroyed the tape, because he said, we could not afford to have anything to do with UFOs."