

INTRODUCTION *

Although the term UFO (for unidentified flying object) has been popular for only about 36 years, the phenomenon it refers to has been observed throughout recorded history. It is an unfortunate term, for literally anything seen in the sky and not immediately recognized is included. In the ancient skies, UFOs were especially numerous.

What are today's UFOs? And what type of person reports them to authorities? Publicity seekers, practical jokers, or sane, intelligent people genuinely mystified by something they have seen? This report cannot, and does not attempt to, answer those questions. After 36 years of concentrated interest in this country alone, experts cannot agree on what inhabits our skies. The U.S. Air Force had official responsibility in the field for 21 years and concluded that whatever was there, it was non-hostile and non-alien. But there are many who disagree.

In order for Earth to be visited by beings from other planets, there must be other inhabitants in the universe. The subject of extraterrestrial intelligence, as it is called, is too involved to be included here, and the reader is referred to a previous work by this author for the House Science and Technology Committee entitled "Possibility of Intelligent Life Elsewhere in the Universe" (revised October 1977) for a discussion of this topic.

* The 1983 update of this report was prepared by Mr. George D. Havas of the Library of Congress Science and Technology Division while he was on special detail to the Science Policy Research Division of the Congressional Research Service. The original 1976 report was prepared by Marcia S. Smith of the Science Policy Research Division, CRS.

In addition to discussion about UFOs in general, there have been theories advanced that much of our present day knowledge, and indeed our evolution itself, was helped along by aliens. This "ancient astronaut" philosophy and that of the Bermuda Triangle are discussed briefly in an appendix. They are only of peripheral importance to a discussion of UFOs and are included only because they also deal with alien visits to Earth.