

Flying Saucers over The White House: The Inside Story of Captain Edward J. Ruppelt and His Official U.S. Airforce Investigation of UFOs by Colin Bennett. 172 pp. \$16.99 (paperback). New York: Cosimo, 2010. ISBN 9781616404543.

Defying the pundits of the past that the flying saucer craze would fade into history as a popular culture anomaly, the issue is still with us more than sixty years later. Indeed in terms of sighting reports it has quieted down a good deal from the almost hysterical headlines of the 1940s through the 1960s when every odd light in the sky was reported and published, no matter how lacking in detail. From the 1970s onward we saw the rise of strangeness in the reports. Stories became more detailed in describing close encounters, contacts, abductions, physical examinations of humans by aliens, and even hybrid breeding of man with extraterrestrials. This increase in reports of the intrusion of flying saucers into the lives of people so overtly certainly catches one's attention, but with the downside of being less believable with, at least to date, the lack of any physical evidence to support the remarkable claims. We have settled into a period of the saucers becoming an amusing sidebar in life, with the daily news ignoring most reports of old-fashioned distant sightings in favor of features relegated to the "Lifestyles" sections of whatever medium is reporting. Flying saucers are not as alarming as they once were, yet it is undeniable that the phenomenon is with us forever in the collective consciousness.

Enough time has passed for the topic to be regarded as history. Most of those who were there from the beginning of the modern UFO era in 1947 are no longer available to answer questions about those times. We have to rely upon retellings and reinvestigation to attempt to clarify those odd tales. Sometimes we learn new things. Sometimes old information is found not to be as unusual as was once thought. And sometimes we need to be reminded of what was so disturbing to those who preceded us.

Books on UFOs have always ranged widely in credibility. It was especially difficult in the 1950s for witnesses and investigators trying to define a new genre of strangeness. We know such reports have existed throughout history, but for reasons still debated it came together as a distinct topic of research in 1947. As with any new phenomenon, its beginnings were laced with misinterpretation, exaggeration, and outright hoaxing. The books of the time preserved those problems along with facts, and often the two could not be kept separate.

One book stood above the saucer fray. Edward Ruppelt was the head of the Air Force's Project Blue Book, their investigation of flying saucers, between 1951 and 1953. The Air Force was certainly not a rubber stamp for furthering

saucer hysteria. It was, well, the government. And the government had said up to the time of Ruppelt's term that saucers were not a concern. After leaving the service, Ruppelt decided to write a book about his time in Blue Book. The 1956 release was titled *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, and he suggested that some of the reports he investigated were truly puzzling. When someone like Edward Ruppelt said that flying saucer reports were mysterious, it was eye-opening. The Air Force in fact refused to endorse the book for the reason that it contradicted official policy that no report was evidence of anything unusual. A new release (Cosimo, 2011) of Ruppelt's original book *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, with an Introduction by Bennett, followed the release of *Flying Saucers over the White House*.

Author Colin Bennett has decided to re-examine Ruppelt's time in dealing with flying saucers, 50 years after Ruppelt's untimely death from a heart attack in 1960. For those conspiracy theorists out there: No, there is no evidence he was bumped off by the Air Force. Bennett walks us through Ruppelt's writing, commenting on the sightings and events that developed during those Blue Book years. This is not the first detailed look at Ruppelt, preceded by *Captain Edward J. Ruppelt: Summer of the Saucers—1952* by Wendy Connors and Michael Hall (Rose Press International, 2000). With the relative scarcity of the Connors/Hall work now, Bennett's book will be more available to general readers.

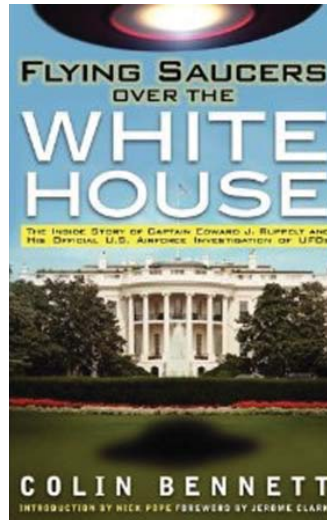
While Ruppelt's original book is not a difficult read, it is useful to have a modern reminder and update of that fascinating history of Air Force UFO investigations which were both detailed and inept, sometimes both at the same time. The question for this work is how useful and in what direction the overview goes in the author's commentary. When he sticks to straight discussion of the events of Ruppelt's experiences in his time leading Blue Book, Bennett is well-grounded. But scattered through the text is the temptation in his analysis to link those past incidents to what Bennett calls "The New Ufology." He describes a UFO as a "liminal form" that is presently "half-in and half-out of directly received experience," sort of a nether world of existence.

This is where the discussion gets sticky because it presumes that the events related by Ruppelt are all literally true as described, without error in reporting and without any additional detail to be discovered to support such a concept. Even a moderately experienced investigator/researcher into UFOs knows that a seemingly solid UFO report of high strangeness can blow apart in an instant with refined analysis and newly unearthed detail added to the mix. Many examples of this abound as old reports are reinvestigated with more energy than originally applied. And Ruppelt's inquiries into UFO reports weren't always that diligent. I recall his retelling of a visit to a group

of General Mills' balloonists doing upper atmosphere research in Minnesota. They reported having seen strange flying objects repeatedly during a variety of flights. Ruppelt made a point to visit the group personally to ferret out details, but he only managed to alienate the men. As he listened to their stories, he would occasionally offer alternative explanations for the sightings. The balloonists saw this as a dismissal of what they thought were inexplicable events, and, as Ruppelt related in his book (p. 120), he felt like he was going to be tossed into a snowbank outside. Ruppelt's meeting ended with his leaving a stack of UFO sighting report forms for the balloonists to fill out in the event of future sightings. It was highly unlikely that such future reports would have been forwarded by a group of trained observers who saw Ruppelt as less-than-overwhelmed by their sightings. It wasn't one of his finer moments.

On page 42 Bennett discusses the matter of the 1948 Air Force "Estimate of the Situation," a Top Secret document drafted for approval with the conclusion that flying saucers were interplanetary. He says that the Estimate was destroyed in 1948, but also mentions that Ruppelt saw it. If Ruppelt saw it, it couldn't have been destroyed. In fact, many years later Dewey Fournet, the Air Force's Pentagon liaison with Project Blue Book, said in a letter to a UFO researcher that he had a copy of the Estimate in the ATIC (Air Technical Intelligence Center) branch files as part of the current intelligence records that he oversaw. Ruppelt likely saw the document during his dealings with Fournet in 1952, five years after the alleged destruction of the Estimate. The document stayed in the files when Fournet left. There is every chance it still exists, buried in approximately 600 shelf-feet of current intelligence records at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. And it is still classified.

As one reads along further in this book, there continues to be a tendency of escalating exaggeration in describing Ruppelt's experiences in the context of Bennett's New Ufology. He discusses Ruppelt's visits to various military and scientific groups to give briefings on Project Blue Book. The existence of the briefings caused Bennett to feel that "we begin to take the ideas of Stanton Friedman, Kevin Randle, and the Woods about MJ-12 more seriously" (p. 84). Friedman and Randle have been advocates of the Roswell incident as the crash of an alien vehicle, and Friedman and the Woods have



promoted the reality of a secret government investigation of crashed saucers, Roswell included, called “Majestic 12.” Bennett seems to minimize the fact that there is a vast and incriminating body of evidence that “MJ-12” is little more than an out-of-control hoax, using crudely manufactured “official” documents as proof of the claims of its advocates. Ruppelt’s briefings in no way, shape, or form support a notion that MJ-12 should be taken seriously. But Bennett’s view presses the idea that a pseudo-agency, created long after the events, lurks behind the Roswell incident, which makes an inevitable appearance here even though Ruppelt never addressed the matter at all as part of his history. The Woods’ mid-1990s version of MJ-12 is considerably less credible than the original MJ-12 story created in the 1980s, and this doesn’t say much about the original story either.

On page 56, referring to Air Force officers’ actions in dealing with the saucer phenomenon as those of a creaking organization, Bennett observes that because these “amateurs” couldn’t have handled the matter of a crashed flying saucer and coverup like Roswell, there must have been “quite a different (possibly hybrid) outfit altogether” responsible for the recovery operation. New Ufology rears its head again. In other words, none of the identifiable military people in Ruppelt’s history was capable of pulling off our modern version of a crashed saucer coverup. This was despite the fact that those mentioned by Ruppelt were undeniably part of real military UFO investigative history. By Bennett’s thinking, a new cast of previously unknown characters instead were all involved in a mysterious MJ-12-like pseudo-history that New Ufology has caused to be manufactured.

Bennett’s enthusiasm for UFO reality frequently gets the best of him in his discussions of Ruppelt’s writings. On page 94 he begins with a report on an unnamed Air Force fighter base where a UFO dodged fighter pursuit in 1952. A report on the sighting was written by the base intelligence officer. From this point on Ruppelt was given an incredible runaround, being called into the fighter base to hear of the UFO report, described by the intelligence officer as “the most fascinating UFO report I have ever seen.” But hear of it was all he could do. The officer told Ruppelt he couldn’t have a copy of the report because it was going to be destroyed by order of the base commander. There was within the Air Force during this time different views on UFOs, much as there always was with the public. Some believed UFOs should be disregarded and some believed them to be worthy of serious investigation. It is not hard to figure out what is happening here. The base commander, a disbeliever, wants the incident swept away. Perhaps reporting flying saucers reflects badly on his personnel as crazy, drinkers, etc., so the event is of no value. But the intelligence officer, thinking saucer reports were significant, informs Project Blue Book of the details before he is forced to destroy them

per orders of his skeptical commander. In hindsight, Ruppelt might have written down the details from the report before handing it back, but in the 1950s orders were orders. Were flying saucer reports worth administrative problems, even though they would seem to have national security implications unrecognized by the higher brass? Apparently not! On page 101, Bennett deals with this, suggesting that the reader should “think right out of the box.” He cites the possibility that “for a short time something very strange happened to this group of highly trained and reasonably intelligent men.” Somehow the men, including Ruppelt, appeared to go “mentally limp” as if under temporary hypnosis. He adds that the men were no longer part of the Air Force machinery, not realizing they had been “attacked.”

I looked for a deeper metaphor in this as Bennett couldn't have meant that a reasonable explanation for the fighter base coverup was that it was orchestrated by the UFO. But he doubled down. “For a short time, the UFO was running the base, the men and the technology,” he continued. What he means is that the actions of the characters are part of the New Ufology concept of the Escher-Penrose state, a behavioral form of the UFO as a liminal object that is only partly of the real world. It is a part of the UFO experience, according to Bennett, to encounter such peculiar behavior coupled to UFO sightings. I wonder though if this is a better explanation than Air Force officers sometimes being obstinate, careless, and mindlessly obedient.

So the trend of the book is that it is a commentary on the pluses and minuses of government handling of UFOs from an almost mystical viewpoint. On page 48 Bennett suggests that UFOs (and Bigfoot too) “belong to our world only as partial and somewhat intermediate constructions.” I read this as meaning that you won't be able to get to the bottom of UFOs and Bigfoot, without adopting and adapting to New Ufology. The author clarifies this by saying the “interdimensional hypothesis is a better explanation for UFOs than the extraterrestrial one” (p. 49). This is a common approach for modern UFO advocates in that the phenomenon is in a realm beyond our ability to understand without much more knowledge of the frontiers of physics. The same argument was offered during the 1950s for flying saucers, but in a slightly different form. Saucers, they said, were from other planets. Mars and Venus were the usual culprits cited as the home bases. Those places were at the time beyond our ability to fully understand without having the means to go there and find out what they were like. The Martian canals were still believed by many to have been artificial constructions. The clouds of Venus hid a temperate environment with a functioning civilization below. In more recent times the “Face on Mars” serves as another example, said by advocates to be a sculpture by Martians.

When we finally acquired the technology to go into space and pulled the

curtains back on what these mysterious places were like, such exotic origins for flying saucers evaporated. The Martian canals never existed and the cloud-shrouded civilized surface of Venus was instead a hellish wasteland of volcanoes and mind-numbing temperature and atmospheric pressure. The Martian Face, with clearer photographs, became an eroded hill that only resembled a face under poor imaging conditions. It was a disappointment to the advocates of these ideas but they pressed on and pushed theories out of reach of current knowledge once again. New Ufology kicks the latest UFO can down the road.

The July 1952 saucer wave was perhaps the biggest story during Ruppelt's Blue Book tenure. It culminated in the Pentagon press conference on July 29th with an array of Air Force brass. The press conference had been called by the head of Air Force Intelligence, Major General John Samford. The reason for the press conference was that the wave had run wild in the media for two weeks, including two weekends of Washington, D.C., skies being virtually invaded by unidentified radar tracking of strange lights. The wave as reported by the press was unusual in that unlike earlier periods of activity when the government was quick to debunk the sightings as significant, the 1952 wave went practically unchallenged by any official pronouncements for most of the two-week span. All of this activity threatened to draw into question the military's ability to deal with embarrassing security penetrations, especially over Washington.

Two things could have happened from the press conference. The Air Force could have admitted they were helpless to stop the saucer reports, not a very likely option. Or they could have dismissed the activity as due to misidentifications, weather phenomena, or a lack of further detail for a positive evaluation. And most important, that they posed no threat to national security. This second option is what happened at the press conference. There wasn't much choice for the Air Force.

Beginning on page 130, Bennett's take on the press conference was nothing short of remarkable. He launched into an attack on General Samford's capabilities and intelligence that went far beyond what I recall about the event from film and transcripts, or what others have said about it. Claiming Samford "lacked all personality and field leadership qualities" and was "out of his depth," Bennett tears into Samford's career. Citing Samford's appointment to the NSA in 1956, he calls it the "National Security Administration" instead of the "National Security Agency," and slams Samford for making mistakes, observing that he "did not have anything like the great synthesizing brain required (presumably!) for such a post."

I looked at the footnotes for evidence of such negative facts and opinions about Samford and was unable to find any in the single biographical source

cited by Bennett. Bennett never knew Samford so where did these notions come from? General Roger Ramey, also a conference participant, was called “the only really sinister element” there. Why? Because according to New Ufology the Roswell crashed saucer coverup was orchestrated by Ramey. These character assessments were uncomfortable to read, but amazingly they became even more hyperbolic.

Samford was favorably compared to Nazi armaments minister Albert Speer as a good “techno-bureaucrat,” with Samford able to make UFO reports vanish as efficiently as the Nazis made millions of corpses vanish! This is about as ugly an analogy as I’ve seen in a long time. Yet, Bennett persisted in the Nazi comparisons. He calls Captain Roy James of the Technical Analysis and Electronics Branch of the Air Technical Intelligence Center at Dayton, Ohio, and a conference participant, one of the “greatest liars in history.” This is said to be because if Stanton Friedman is correct about his theories on Roswell reality (and Bennett felt he “almost certainly” was), then James stands along with all-time liars like Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels, Joseph Stalin, and President Bill Clinton!(?) All because we know Roswell is real, according to Bennett, and these people were part of a monstrous conspiracy to hide the truth.

On page 137 Bennett says that ground observers took still photographs of saucer-shaped objects in the night sky over the White House. I had spent a great deal of time poring through newspaper microfilm of this time, literally hundreds of titles reporting on the July wave. In none of them do I recall seeing still photographs of saucers over the President’s residence. There is one picture claimed to have been taken in 1952 over the Capitol. It first appeared in a tabloid newspaper in the 1970s and was quickly identified as lens flares from the dual light poles in front of the Capitol. Nevertheless, it has been widely reproduced in countless later UFO writings as genuine. The alleged White House photos are not referenced in the text, nor footnoted or discussed further. Where are they?

At this point I had really had enough of this book. It came off as an aggrieved UFO believer going off on familiar events of UFO history after having had a few beers with friends at the local bar. Bennett’s rhetorical excesses were so over-the-top that this cannot be regarded as good UFO history, or even bad UFO history. It is terrible UFO history. He tosses incredible insults at people like a patron throws beanbags to dunk the clown at the carnival. Ruppelt doesn’t deserve this treatment however well-intentioned Bennett was. I trust these problems will be repaired for future volumes.

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