

Volume 18, Number 3
2011

QUEST



THE HISTORY OF SPACEFLIGHT QUARTERLY



STS-135

Credit: NASA

An Interview with
Space Shuttle / Mir
Astronaut John Blaha

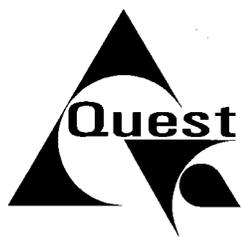
Thoughts on the
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Organizing Space for
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Braun
Weekly Notes



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QUARTERLY

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when mixed with the truth, but that isn't how it worked for me.

Area 51: An Uncensored History of America's Top Secret Military Base is not so much about Area 51 at all. Area 51 does play a role in most of the chapters, but really the book takes an overarching look at the secret as well as public

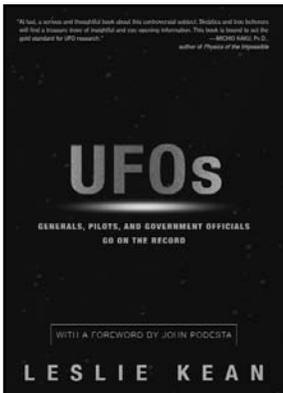
development of America's military technology focusing on atomic testing, the U2, the A12 Oxcart, and for added color—UFOs. Jacobsen's inclusion of UFOs, and her sensational treatment of them, rips apart any meaningful weaving she has done. If I were her editor I would have cut all that out—there are

interesting stories in the book, but pulling them out is too much work.

Hunter Hollins
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REVIEW

UFOs: GENERALS, PILOTS, AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS GO ON THE RECORD



by Leslie Kean

Harmony Books, 2010.

ISBN: 978-0-307-71684-2

Pages: xiii, 335, foreword, illustrations, acknowledgments, notes, index

Price: \$25.99, hardcover

In many respects this is a fascinating book. In other ways it is infuriating. In still others it is a bit silly. The premise of *UFOs: Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record* is that while 95 percent of all reports of UFOs—unidentified flying objects, which is not necessarily a synonym for extraterrestrial visitation despite what many people think—are easily explainable through mundane observation and investigation, at the same time that remaining five percent is difficult to understand and explain. OK, so far so good. It is that five percent of unexplained observations that journalist Leslie Kean focuses on in this book.

Using well the tools of the inves-

tigative reporter, first-hand observation, and interviews with those who will talk, Kean creates a series of personal portraits and experiences relating to UFO stories of the recent past. Kean tracked down and talked with a number of government officials from around the world who claim to have seen or investigated some unexplained phenomena. In every case their veracity is unquestionable. She starts with Belgian military Major General Wilfrid de Brouwer and his efforts to investigate a spate of UFO reports in the latter 1980s. A responsible government official, he was frustrated that he could not arrive at a rational explanation for what was reported. Others follow, and the bulk of the book is a series of interviews and the like from various officials. In every case, those profiled in the book could not explain what happened. Some left it at that; others went on to speculate about extraterrestrial visitation.

Much of the book is essentially a collection in one place of as many of these unexplained UFO incidents as possible. Kean uses solid, accepted, and not spurious documentation from official military and government UFO investigations, as well as quite a lot of information from those involved in recent sightings and inquiries. As such, this is a useful conglomeration of primary source materials relating to this subject.

It is the possible explanations of what witnesses say that they saw but could not identify that remains the mystery, and despite the efforts in the book these explanations are still unsatisfacto-

ry. Of course, humanity has long been intensely interested in supernatural occurrences. The ancient Greeks had their gods who came down from Mount Olympus; people of the medieval era saw angels, the Virgin Mary, and devils, as well as fairies and elves. UFO sightings in the modern era—none of which has produced any physical evidence whatsoever—are essentially in the same category.

Humans have always been fascinated and terrified of the unknown. I would suggest that the reports of UFOs and especially the conflation of them with encounters with extraterrestrials have been a response to the duality of fascination and terror of humanity over the unknown in this modern era where annihilation may take many forms, some of them of our own doing but others not. Some of these reports, of course, were part of the Cold War phenomenon, as Americans longed for the help of a benevolent, wise, and powerful alien race that could chaperone humanity through the possibility of nuclear holocaust *al a Klaatu* from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Some reported incidents were negative, harkening back to the terror expressed in Jules Verne's *War of the Worlds* and featured in any number of more recent science fiction works from *Independence Day* to the recent *Falling Skies* television series. Some reports reflect our perception of the technological possibilities of space travel. Moreover, if the Earth was in the midst of a space age, what about more advanced civilizations on other worlds? Might they someday journey to

Earth? To some the UFOs speak to the nightmares of humanity. But to others they inculcate some of the sublime dreams of humanity and they are therefore significant because of what they signal about our perceptions of what is possible in the modern age.

While this book's marketing trades on the UFO craze, the actual book is less sensationalistic than you might think. The one major conclusion that comes through is that governments across the world should pursue more aggressively investigations of these phenomena to understand what is taking place, if anything. It is interesting who supports this conclusion. John Podesta, certainly no off-kilter ufologist, wrote the foreword for this book and makes the point that he supports, "the establishment of a small U.S. government agency to cooperate with other countries that are already formally investigating, reviewing, and releasing information relevant to UFOs. This new agency would handle release of documents and any future investigations with openness and efficiency. It's an idea worth considering, and it is definitely time for government, scientists, and aviation experts to work together in unraveling the questions about UFOs that have so far remained in the dark" (p. xii).

Where are Scully and Mulder from the *X-Files* when we need them?

Implicit in this call, however, is a kernel of doubt that the government, scientists, and aviation experts have been forthcoming in supporting such an open investigation. My experience is counter to that. Certainly, some roll their eyes when UFOs are mentioned, but largely because of the popular culture connotations it evokes, the mythology of alien abductions, and the like. But more likely there is a willingness, even desire, to believe in extraterrestrials. When I ask, and I have done this many times, at gatherings of space scientists and engineers whether they believe we are not alone in the universe, virtually every hand goes up in the affirmative. I believe they are out there as well. When I ask the next question, how many believe that Earth is being visited by extraterrestrials there are still usually a few hands that go up. My hand does not go up for that question. And it doesn't for this one either: when I ask if anyone has any evidence to support the contention that Earth is being visited, no one ever has any. There is not a scintilla of evidence to support this contention. And we should hope so. If Earth was being visited it means that extraterrestrials have technologies so far

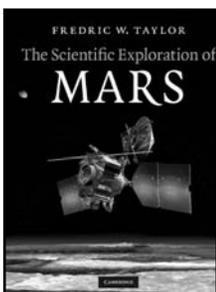
beyond our own that they could easily enslave or exterminate humanity. It's only a question of whether or not they would; and our experience on Earth is that when two unequal civilizations meet, there is always a winner and a loser. I suppose we could believe in the "Prime Directive" and the United Federation of Planets from *Star Trek*, but I don't.

As it is, I know many people in the space community who have spent their lives in search of life beyond this planet, and thus far with no positive results. Should there be any inkling of extraterrestrial visitation, they would sound the news far and wide. They have no reason to keep it quiet; it would positively affect everything they have dedicated their lives toward. As it is, we should all keep looking, but I question that the five percent of unexplained UFO sightings have any relationship to extraterrestrial visitation. Despite her best intentions to do so, Leslie Kean does not convince me otherwise.

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REVIEW

THE SCIENTIFIC EXPLORATION OF MARS



by Frederic W. Taylor

Cambridge University Press, 2010

Pages: v, 348, prologue, acknowledgments, notes, illustrations, appendices, index

ISBN: 978-0-521-82956-4

Price: \$45.00, hardcover

Mars has long held a special fascination for humans who pondered the planets of the solar system—partly because of the possibility that life might either presently exist there or at some time in the past it might have existed there. Astronomer Percival Lowell became interested in Mars during the latter

part of the nineteenth century, and he built what became the Lowell Observatory near Flagstaff, Arizona, to study the planet. He argued that Mars had once been a watery planet and that the topographical features known as canals had been built by intelligent beings, created as a planetary-wide effort to bring precious water from the poles to inhabited parts of Mars nearer the equator. The idea of intelligent life on Mars remained in the popular imagination for a long time, and not until the scientific data returned from probes to the planet beginning in the mid-1960s did this begin to change.

But near the dawn of the new millennium this began to change as probe after probe peeled back the mysteries of Mars. NASA's official strategy, "Follow the Water," yielded enormously significant results. Since then satellites have imaged gullies on Martian cliffs and crater walls, suggesting that liquid water has seeped onto the surface in the geologically