

UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT, a moving aerial or celestial phenomenon, detected visually or by radar but whose nature is not immediately understood. Interest in unidentified flying objects (UFO's) stems from speculation that some of them are the products of civilizations beyond the earth, and from the psychological insights into contemporary human problems that this interpretation provides.

Observations.-Unidentified flying objects have been described variously as rapidly moving or hovering; disc-shaped, cigar-shaped, or ball-shaped; moving silently or noisily; with a fiery exhaust, or with no exhaust whatever; accompanied by flashing lights, or uniformly glowing with a silvery cast. The diversity of the observations suggests that UFO's have no common origin and that the use of such terms as UFO's or "flying saucers" serves only to confuse the issue by grouping generically a variety of unrelated phenomena.

In the United States, popular interest in unidentified flying objects began on June 24, 1947, when a group of rapidly moving, glistening objects was observed from the air in daytime, near Mount Rainier, Washington. The observer, a Seattle resident, dubbed them "flying saucers." The sighting received extensive publicity. Somewhat similar sightings have been reported ever since. The differences among these observations, however, are as striking as the observations themselves.

Investigations.-Because of its national defense responsibility, the U.S. Air Force investigates reports of unidentified flying objects over the United States. The number of sightings investigated by the Air Force in the period 1947-1965 varied greatly from year to year.

REPORTED SIGHTINGS OF UFO'S, 1947-1965

Year	Number	Year	Number
1947.....	79	1957.....	1,178
1948.....	143	1958.....	473
1949.....	186	1959.....	364
1950.....	169	1960.....	557
1951.....	121	1961.....	591
1952.....	1,501	1962.....	474
1953.....	425	1963.....	399
1954.....	429	1964.....	572
1955.....	404	1965.....	886
1956.....	778		

Source: Tacker, Lawrence, J., *Flying Saucers and the U.S. Air Force* (Princeton, N.J. 1960); and Library of Congress, *Facts about Unidentified Flying Objects* (Washington 1966).

Evaluation of these reports is difficult. Observations frequently are sketchy, and different reports of the same phenomenon are often dissimilar, or even irreconcilable. Observers tend to exaggerate. Deliberate hoaxes, some involving double-exposure photography, have been perpetrated.

Most UFO's have been identified as belonging to one of the following categories: unconventional aircraft; aircraft under uncommon weather conditions; aircraft with unusual external light patterns; meteorological and other high-altitude balloons; artificial earth satellites; flocks of birds; reflections of searchlights or headlights off clouds; reflection of sunlight from shiny surfaces; luminescent organisms (including one case of a firefly lodged between two adjacent panes of glass in an airplane cockpit window); optical mirages and looming (a mirage in which images of objects below the horizon appear distorted); lenticular cloud formations; ball lightning; sun dogs; meteors, including green fireballs; planets, especially Venus; bright stars; and the aurora borealis.

Radar detection of unidentified flying objects has also occurred occasionally. Many of these sightings have been explained as radar reflections from temperature inversion layers in the atmosphere and other sources of radar "angels."

Considering the difficulties involved in tracking down visual and radar sightings, it is remarkable that all but a few percent of the reported UFO's have been identified as naturally occurring-if sometimes unusual-phenomena. It is of some interest that the UFO's which are unidentified do not fall into uniform categories such as motion, color, and lighting, but rather run through the same range of these variables as the identified UFO's. In October 1957, Sputnik I, the first earth-orbiting artificial satellite, was launched. Of 1,178 UFO sightings in that year, 701 occurred between October and December. The clear implication is that Sputnik and its attendant publicity was responsible for many UFO sightings.

Earlier, in July 1952, a set of visual and radar observations of unidentified flying objects over Washington, D.C., caused substantial public concern. Government concern was reflected in the creation in November of that year of a special panel to evaluate these reports. The panel was established by the Office of Scientific Intelligence of the Central Intelligence Agency,