19. ON PUBLIC REACTION

Let us assume, for the present, that this event did actually happen, that extraterrestrial visitors did arrive. How would the public, once informed, respond? What chain of problems could it create in our society? How would *you* react, if there was enough documented evidence to support it?

The Holloman scenario and the question of how the public would respond to it was put to five leading American social psychologists. They were asked to draw up a report based on available information and research. Because no such event has ever happened before, each psychologist had to draw on his own sources and experiences, and speculate on the probable result.

The study was carried out under the direction of Dr. Leon Festinger of the School for Social Research, State University of New York. The contributors were Dr. Howard Rachlin, State University of New York; Dr. Elliot Aronson, University of Texas; Dr. Elaine Walster, University of Wisconsin; and one prominent authority from Yale, who wished to remain anonymous. Each contributor covered a different aspect of the problem, although in some cases they overlapped and reinforced each other. Keep in mind that time did not allow this project to be developed into a definitive study of the problem. The reports are given here in abridged form.

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First, Dr. Aronson of the University of Texas believes that a person's reaction to news of the humanoid

from outer space would depend to a very large extent on his prior belief, and his degree of commitment to that belief. "I do not believe that there will be many extreme reactions; people will not panic, they will not become aggressive, they will not leave the cities, they won't absent themselves from their workaday world." He points out that there *have* been examples of panic in such situations, such as the reactions to Orson Welles's radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*. "But the situation is very different in 1974. Basically, it is not a panic situation; there is no clear and present danger." He feels "the news that a humanoid from outer space exists will not be terribly startling to most people, especially in view of the fact that the government apparently has the situation under control and has been interviewing this humanoid for three or four years."

He went on, "A person's reaction to the news will depend on his prior beliefs. Let's look at a scenario in terms of two people. We can multiply these two people by several million and get what I would regard as the typical response of someone a) who is committed to the belief that there is life in outer space, that UFOs were and are a real phenomenon, and b) a person who has pooh-poohed the notion that UFOs are real and whose prior belief was that there is no human-like life in outer space."

> Sam and Mildred are husband and wife. During the fifties and sixties, as apparent sightings of UFOs began to attain national prominence, Sam became increasingly convinced that they were a real phenomenon. After all, Sam reasoned, many people in many walks of life testified to having seen strange objects floating in space. Some of these people were prominent, highly respected people, some were law-enforcement officers, like sheriffs, military officers. Many books have been written claiming that UFOs

are a real phenomenon. Photographs were taken that seemed to show strange objects, etc., etc., etc.

Millie, on the other hand, thought that the sighting of UFOs was a bunch of hogwash, that a lot of the so-called space ships were the work of pranksters; she could actually point to a few instances where pranks were uncovered and generalized from these data. Furthermore, many of the other so-called sightings could be explained on the basis of hysteria—a few gullible people were taken in, or they saw sunspots or various cloud formations and that this kind of sighting spread by hysterical people to the point where many people were "seeing" things that really didn't exist. For support, she quotes a report from a government-sponsored commission, published in the late sixties, which concluded that there is no evidence to support the notion that UFOs exist. The commission was chaired by Edward Condon, a highly regarded physicist. She is convinced that there is no human-like life on outer planets, and therefore UFOs cannot possibly be a real phenomenon.

Over the years Sam and Millie have argued bitterly about the topic of UFOs and whether or not they exist. Thus when the press conference was held breaking the news of the humanoid's existence, Sam's immediate internal reaction was intense and unmitigated joy. After all, his belief was confirmed. His commitment was exonerated. But after an initial hurrah, his dominant and persistent response was calm acceptance. He sees no need . . . to stay home from work—he does not do anything differently. He was convinced for years that intelligent human life existed in outer space and it is certainly not surprising to learn that the government now has absolute proof of that existence—proof in the form of this person whom they have been interviewing for the past four years or so. They have been in direct contact with

this person for four years and no disaster has struck and, accordingly, it is highly unlikely that any disaster would occur in the foreseeable future.

It should be emphasized that Sam's calm acceptance of the news that human life from another planet does definitely exist is in part Sam's way of demonstrating his confidence in his prior beliefs. That is to say, the calmer he can react in public and the more accepting he is of the event without outward show of intense emotion, the more convincing he will be to himself and to other people. Thus, when Sam arrives at the office and his colleagues ask him if he's heard the news, he simply shrugs and says, "It was simply a matter of time—I knew it would happen sooner or later."

Mildred's reaction, on the other hand, is quite different. When she sees the press conference and views the humanoid she immediately suspects that the government is lying. Because of the fact that she has committed herself to the belief that UFOs are a farce and do not exist and to the belief that there is no intelligent life in outer space, anything that implies that she is wrong must be derogated and disposed of. Thus, Mildred immediately assumes that the government has something to gain by implying or demonstrating that they do indeed have a humanoid from outer space. ("Perhaps Nixon is trying to divert attention from Watergate or the energy crisis.") Thus, in almost a paranoid manner she convinces herself that it is a sham, that the so-called humanoid is an actor playing an elaborate role, hoodwinking the gullible. If she can succeed in doing this, then she can succeed in maintaining her high self-concept and in not losing the running argument that she's been having with Sam (and others) over the past several years.

Now in order to do this, she has to go to great

lengths to convince herself and others that the government has something to gain by doing this and that the government is dishonest and clever. Thus she will recall the Watergate situation, the so-called dirty tricks, what John Mitchell referred to as the White House Horror Stories, as examples of the duplicity and sham, as the lengths which the people in the government are willing to go in order to promote something that is to their own advantage. Moreover, because her belief has been apparently disconfirmed, she will seek social support for the continuation of that belief. Thus, she will frantically run around to try to convince other people that there is no life in outer space, that the so-called humanoid is a fake.

Notice, if you will, the contrast between Sam's behavior and Mildred's behavior. Sam's behavior is calm acceptance. Mildred, on the other hand, is fervently buttonholing and attempting to convince everyone in sight that the humanoid doesn't really exist, but he's a paid actor in makeup, etc. . . . In summary, not only does she construct plausible and elaborate theories of deception and conspiracy to account for this apparent phenomenon, but in addition, she seeks a good deal of social support for her belief.

The evidence underlying this reasoning, stems largely from the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). If an event occurs that is consonant with one's beliefs, that is, consistent with beliefs that a person has committed himself to, that person feels pleased, happy, calm, relaxed and is not motivated to do anything except be pleased. On the other hand, if events occur that are dissonant with the person's beliefs and commitments, he strives to reduce that dissonance. One way to reduce the dissonance is to deny the fact that those

events have actually occurred, and in order to deny that fact, one has to construct an apparently reasonable explanation for the events that is consistent with the primary belief.

Moreover, since a state of dissonance is an unstable and psychologically uncomfortable situation, one really needs to bolster that explanation for the events and to strengthen one's initial belief, in this case, the belief that there is no life in outer space. The more you can convince other people that you are right—in this case, the more you can convince other people that there is a government plot—the greater will be the reduction of dissonance and the more comfortable you will become.

Evidence for this phenomenon stems from many experiments, most notably in a study by Festinger, Reicken, and Schachter *(When Prophecy Fails)*. In this book, the authors describe a situation in which individuals predicted the end of the world and when the end of the world didn't come, they convinced themselves the reason it didn't come was because of their pious belief and fervent prayers. Prior to the disconfirming of their belief, they showed no apparent interest in proselytizing people; after the disconfirmation, they made great efforts to proselytize. More generally, there is a host of evidence indicating that when an individual commits himself to a particular action, unless there is good reason for that commitment, he comes to believe in that commitment, even in the face of a good deal of disconfirming evidence. When disconfirming evidence occurs, he tends to distort it so as to make it consonant with his beliefs.

My description of Mildred's actions may be a bit extreme. It is conceivable that many people who committed themselves to the notion that the UFOs were figments of people's imagination would not

take as extreme a position as Mildred did. That is, if the evidence of the existence of a humanoid is very powerful, or overwhelming, it would be very difficult for a person to maintain that the government was lying in the face of that much evidence, without exhibiting behavior that was bordering on the psychotic. In this case, the individual might try to reduce dissonance in an alternative manner. Perhaps he could accept that this humanoid *does* exist and still maintain that most of the evidence for UFOs in the past *was* imaginary. This would allow the person to convince himself that he was correct in his initial assessment in spite of the fact that there is life in outer space.

But although it may seem far-fetched, Mildred's behavior is *not* without precedent. In several psychological experiments, it has been shown that people will tend to derogate the source of information that is dissonant with their own beliefs. For example, in an experiment by Aronson, Turner, and Carlsmith, it was shown that wherever the source of information was derogatable, people who discovered information that ran counter to their own opinions tended to derogate the source of that information, that is, by convincing themselves that that person was stupid, foolish, etc., etc. People do often change their opinions in the face of disconfirming evidence, but they will not change their opinions very easily if they have firmly committed themselves to that opinion in advance. That is, the evidence shows, if we believe something, but are not firmly committed to that belief, and we hear some evidence to the contrary from an unimpeachable source, we will change our opinions, but if we are deeply committed to that belief, and we encounter evidence that runs counter to our belief from a source that is derogatable, most of us tend to derogate the source of that information rather

than give up our commitment to our prior belief (Aronson, Turner, Carlsmith).

2

Dr. Walster, in collaboration with four graduate students at the University of Wisconsin, approached the problem from another standpoint. They directed their attention to the importance, when presenting news of aliens landing, of emphasizing the physical similarities between them and us, playing down the dissimilarities in body parts, coloring, etc.

Within the report there was a point made about the gift of knowledge and information that might be offered to us by the aliens and how we might respond:

> Most Americans have learned that one rarely gets "something for nothing." They know that when they accept benefits, which they cannot repay in kind, they may be obligated to repay their benefactor in unspecified ways for an unspecified time. Democritus (in the Fourth Century B.C.) said, "Accept favors in the foreknowledge that you will have to give a greater return for them." Americans are usually unwilling to extend such unlimited blanket credit.
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> Or . . . Americans may have more specific fears. They may worry that their benefactor will demand excessive gratitude or constant acknowledgment of his social and moral superiority. Homans (1961) observed that "Anyone who accepts from another service he cannot repay in kind incurs inferiority as a cost of receiving the service. The esteem he gives the other he forgoes himself" (p. 320).
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> Thus, social psychologists have found that individuals most appreciate gifts when they can give something in return.

The Air Force, then, should be careful to stress that although the alien humanoids will surely give us things *we* want—universal peace, a cure for cancer, or solar energy—Americans also possess things the aliens want—jazz, achievement motivation . . . and Colonel Sanders Chicken.

Finally, Americans should be reassured that Earth-Alien relationships are ultimately at *their* discretion. Regardless of how reassuring the interviewer is, aliens are still potentially frightening. (For example, if the aliens can provide enormous benefits, they may be more powerful than we are. What if they turn on us tomorrow?)

Thus, Americans should be made to feel that it is their hand which guides the Fail-Safe button. . . . The fact that the aliens possess these weaknesses should be revealed to the public. It will reassure them that if worst comes to worst, the aliens—so recently brought into their lives and who seem to promise so much—can be taken *out* of their lives.

3

The third and most comprehensive report was from a highly regarded psychologist in the field of social behavior. For reasons of his own, his name will remain confidential. His analysis was peppered with enough levity to make it not only informative but enjoyable.

He begins with the statement that available theory and research can be quite useful, but in a very limited way. He then dubs the Holloman Air Force Base incident as the "Humanoid-Organisms-Allegedly-Extraterrestrial—HOAEX, for short." This he feels would be the reaction of the many eminent scientists, statesmen, journalists, and educators that were not asked to be present to witness the incident. The doctor states:

The initial skepticism, and outright disbelief publicly expressed by many eminent scientific authorities as well as by other prestigious leaders of the national community who were not insiders will have a marked effect on the reactions of the U.S. public. They will call attention to the improbabilities of the TV press conference scenario such as:

—How likely is it that creatures from another world with the capability of sending emissaries here would do so without radio contact first?

—How likely is it that the creatures could survive in the earth's atmosphere—or are they in a sealed environment that they brought along with many years' supply of the gases they need, etc.?

—Would the representatives of a vastly superior civilization allow themselves to be kept at an Air Force base for three years?

The announcement will also get a very bad press from leading scientists and politicians in the Soviet Union and in other countries where the U.S. government, and especially the U.S. military establishment, is not trusted. Some of them will point out that the U.S. would not be wasting its time on presenting the HOAEX on TV unless they were up to no good. For example, they may speculate that the U.S. Air Force is planning to use a new destructive weapon against the S.U. and claim to the world, on the basis of its HOAEX show, that it was done by remote control.

In the absence of any clear-cut demonstration that would be utterly convincing to the majority of scientists outside the little circle of the AFB, the authenticity of HOAEX will continue to influence the public's views and actions, even if supposedly convincing evidence is continuously being presented on later TV shows and in documentary movies by the

AF and its scientists (and by other scientists invited to join the prestigious university lab to which the HOAEX visitors have been transferred to counteract charges of an AF plot). Many of the scientists who initially attacked the credibility of the original TV show will have publicly committed themselves. And public commitment is a great source of resistence to persuasive communications that might otherwise change a person's mind; it leads the person to reduce dissonance or conflict by bolstering his original position with new arguments. (Such studies have been made by: Deutsch, Krauss and Rosenau, 1962; Festinger, 1964; Gerard, Blevans, and Malcolm, 1964; Janis and Mann, 1968; Kiesler, 1968; McGuire, 1968.) So the public will continue to be treated to a wide variety of impressive negativistic comments during the months following the upcoming TV show, which will make for considerable ambiguity.

Most people, when asked for an opinion on what they think the public reaction would be to aliens from a distant planet landing, seem to feel it would result in panic. Addressing himself to the possibility of panic, he gave this response:

> . . . studies of public reactions to war, disasters, epidemics, and other such frightening events indicate that mass panic rarely occurs except under certain very unusual circumstances (Baker and Chapman, 1962; Barton, 1969; Berkun et al., 1962; Fritz and Marks, 1954; Janis, 1951 and 1971; Kelley et al., 1965; Wolfenstein, 1957). The main type of situation in which mass panic is likely to occur is one in which people are suddenly made aware of clear and present danger that is rapidly encroaching and they also perceive that the escape routes will soon be closed so that within a few minutes they will be

trapped (e.g., a conflagration inside a crowded theater). These are essentially the same circumstances that create acute traumatic neurosis, giving rise to spells of uncontrollable anxiety and memory loss and other cognitive impairments that persist for days or weeks. (Grinker and Spiegel, 1945; Janis, 1951; Kardiner and Spiegel, 1947; Tyhurst, 1957.) Panic does not invariably occur even when these extreme conditions are present. Subsidiary factors also play a role. Under conditions of potential entrapment, ambiguities about how extensive and horrible the danger might be will heighten fear and contribute to panic. (But it should be noted that panic is *not* a likely response to verbal warnings that are ambiguous with regard to authenticity or that create uncertainty as to whether there might be severe, mild, or no danger at all in the offing. The disaster literature cited above indicates that ambiguous warning messages are likely to be discounted and ignored by all except a small percentage of people, mainly hyperanxious neurotic persons.)

According to studies of war and disaster, three other factors also contribute to the probability that a person will display a panic reaction under conditions of potential entrapment: (1) lack of opportunity for engaging in vigorous protective action; (2) loss of contact with members of the family or with other primary groups; (3) lack of reassuring communication from esteemed persons.

Another stereotype about public reactions to exotic threats that is promoted by some sensationalistic journalists is that many people are likely to wander about senselessly, like zombies. It is true that stunned, dazed, and psychotic-like withdrawal are sometimes observed in large-scale disasters, but usually it is among people who have been severely vic-

timized—e.g., who have been injured or who have seen members of their family killed.

None of the primary or contributory factors that make for panic or traumatic neurotic reactions, or stunned psychotic-like behavior, are likely to be present as a result of the upcoming TV press conference, with its emphasis on friendliness and cooperation with the HOAEX. Even if the message were suddenly to change the next day, with the HOAEX, presented as malign, threatening creatures who have massive death-ray weapons that can wipe out entire cities, the mere warning message itself is unlikely to evoke panic, since there is no clear and present danger.

But what about Orson Welles's radio broadcast of the "Invasion from Mars"—didn't that cause a mass panic? True, the word "panic" has been used to describe the public's reactions. But a careful reading of Cantril's (1940) study of that so-called panic reveals that a small number of people in New Jersey went so far as to get into their cars to evacuate (some after carefully filling the car with essential provisions) in response to an official radio announcement to evacuate by the Governor of New Jersey. For most people, the "panic" consisted only of telephoning friends and relatives to tell them about the bad news they just heard. The main cause of the excitement was the realistic newscasts about gas spreading in New Jersey and the Governor's evacuation warning heard by people who tuned in after the program started and missed the initial announcement that it was a fictional presentation.

Panic and distraught wild behavior are certainly in everyone's repertoire and could be evoked if the scenario for HOAEX were drastically changed—if they came as enemies, performed an amazingly destructive demonstration to show unambiguously the

powerful capabilities of their superior weapons and then announced that within a very short time limit everyone in a particular metropolitan area of the U.S. would be dealt that same destructive treatment. Within the doomed area, panic behavior might then become widespread unless extraordinarily skillful leaders took command of the situation, giving impressive reassurances, organizing the evacuation, and mobilizing other protective actions. But that is an entirely different scenario from the one that was given.

So far I have mainly been talking about how people will *not* behave. How will they behave?

Hunger for news. Given the sensational nature of the upcoming televised press conference, the vast majority of people in the U.S. will display news-hungry behavior—many will be glued to the TV set watching for the latest developments. The controversy about authenticity will add to the hunger for news. Even those people who think the whole thing is a hoax will be keenly interested in picking up every scrap of news and comment they can because of uncertainty about who is up to what.

. . . And the more the uncertainties, especially about the possible hidden malignant intentions of the representatives of the superior civilization, the more rumors will spread throughout the nation about secret information that the government's withholding (cf. Allport and Postman, 1947).

He then addresses himself to the question of public behavior:

The main behavioral consequence of all information-seeking and misinformation-spreading will be *absenteeism.* While few workers and clerks will stay home during the day to watch TV, many of them will engage in mental absenteeism in the factory or office.

Large numbers of people will be too busy talking to each other about the news, listening to transistor radios, and reading newspapers to do more than a small fraction of their normal daily work. How long this will last will depend partly on how long the story is kept alive by the mass media and partly on how long the major ambiguities persist. If the whole thing is promptly exposed as a hoax and the perpetrators are identified and their intent made clear, public interest will die. Or if the supply of fresh news quickly becomes exhausted, public interest will soon subside—as in the case of the moon shots. But otherwise for quite a time after the upcoming TV show interest in HOAEX will upstage the impeachment proceedings in the House and the trial in the Senate. Even Nixon's resignation speech on the eve of the Senate vote will receive less attention.

Those who are more uncertain, skeptical, or outright disbelieving, will be unlikely to develop a grassroots, anti-governmental mass movement so long as there is no clear-cut threat or deprivation to mobilize collective action (see Milgram and Toch, 1969; Smelser, 1963). Nevertheless, there will be some preestablished small groups that will be mobilized for action—proselytizing, making propaganda for their cause, organizing demonstrations, etc.

First, there are the religious doomsday cults that thrive on flying saucers and little blue or green humanoids. All the publicity about their "thing," on which they practically held a monopoly until the upcoming TV show, will mobilize them to become much more active in making statements to the press; some will predict that the HOAEX civilization will destroy the earth next Tuesday. When their prophecies fail, some of these groups will react the way the doomsday group studied by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) did—markedly increasing their

proselytizing behavior. Other such groups, however, may limit themselves to a "joyous reunion" when their prophecies fail, as did the members of the "Church of the True World" studied by Hardyk and Braden (1962).

The proselytizing activity of some of the doomsday groups will be matched and possibly exceeded by that of religious youth groups, like the Jesus freaks, who will treat the HOAEX story as a long-awaited sign that superhuman forces are at work in the universe. Many of the people who were impressed by the *Chariots of the Gods* (the book and the movie) and who are longing for an out-of-this-world hero like the *Stranger in a Strange Land* will rally to the cause of the blue humanoids and endow them with superhuman lovingkindness and messianic qualities. Support for the messianic religious movement—in the form of joining the group, participating in religious ceremonies, etc.—will be greately increased insofar as the authenticity of the HOAEX is attested to by reputable scientists and political leaders. (A messianic movement in Europe several centuries ago was given just such impetus when leading authorities of the time endorsed the authenticity of the messiah, as described by G. Scholem in *Sabbati Sevi.)* But the messianic movement may be limited in its appeal, attracting mainly those already predisposed to religious fringe movements. It will have more widespread appeal if the HOAEX encourage it, directly or indirectly, by claiming that they will help earth people to save themselves from the evils that beset mankind. In this case, a much more popular messianic religious movement is to be expected, especially if it is endorsed by prestigious national leaders.

If the dissimilarities between the HOAEX and us are stressed in the mass media, and if the visitors

continue to be kept in isolation, and if there are no promises of interaction between mankind and other representatives of the HOAEX civilization, then the more hostile type of fringe-group movements will be aided in recruiting more participants.

These groups are generally made up of people who have seen better days and who chronically project evil intentions to out-groups; many of the members seem to be addicted to patriotic fervor, directed against enemies from within and from without, because it provides them with compensatory feelings of restoring their lost status (Bell, 1963; Elm, 1972; Hofstadter, 1963 and 1965; Lipset, 1963). As long as the mass media continue to emphasize the main message of the upcoming TV press conference—that the HOAEX are benign, friendly, and cooperative —the Blue Menace movement is not likely to become anything more than a slightly expanded fringe movement.

. . . Suppose that a week or so after that show, they happen to mention in a TV interview that their mission is to prepare earth for the arrival of HOAEX colonizers who will naturally use their superior abilities and knowledge to run things here. Or perhaps that they have waited for all the USAF publicity to give them the maximum credibility they need to deliver an ultimatum, based say on the assumption vividly conveyed in Leo Szilard's story "Calling All Planets," namely, that earthlings have become dangerous to civilizations on other planets because mankind has nuclear weapons and is now achieving the capability of launching them to targets in outer space, but is unable to curb its destructive impulses.

In order to counteract the menace to all higher forms of life throughout the universe, an appropriate ultimatum to the U.S., the S.U. and all other members of the nuclear club might be to dismantle all

factories that manufacture atomic weapons and to destroy all cyclotrons and other equipment essential for maintaining or developing nuclear capabilities. In that case, as I mentioned earlier, the problem of panic would loom large (depending on whether the threatened destructive blow for failing to live up to the ultimatum was completely credible and whether the deadline was imminent).

In general, under conditions of extreme threat, the need for affiliation and for reliance on powerful leaders becomes very strong (Collins and Helmreich, 1970; Gerard and Rabbie, 1961; Hamblin, 1958; Janis, 1958 and 1962; Latane, 1966; Radloff and Helmreich, 1968; Rabbie, 1961 and 1964; Schachter, 1959; Wrightsman, 1969). At the same time, many people will want to link up with the S.U. and other former enemies to cope with the common predicament (cf. Elms, 1972; Sherif, 1966). As Elms points out, some social scientists have suggested "that what we really need is an enemy invader from outer space; *then* we would unite as one species to drive the invader away, and live in peace thereafter." But we sure can't count on it. If the S.U. doesn't believe the authenticity of the ultimatum transmitted to the USAF and thinks that HOAEX is a hoax, we are in for real trouble—maybe World War III.

20. SPACE PROBES FROM EARTH

How improbable is it that we could have been contacted or will be contacted by another intelligent civilization from a far corner of our universe? To get a perspec-