

UFOs: Generals, Pilots and Government Officials Go on the Record by Leslie Kean. Crown, 2010. 352 pp. \$25.99 (hardcover). ISBN 9780307716842.

“Militant agnosticism” is an unlikely pairing of loaded words, but the idea emerges from Leslie Kean’s *UFOs: Generals, Pilots and Government Officials Go on the Record*, with a blue-chip gallery of advocates. And it may be the best hope for unclogging America’s intellectual arteries of a pathological aversion to a legitimate policy debate since the Air Force officially terminated Project Blue Book 40 years ago.

Kean, a former public radio investigative reporter who worked to expose human rights abuses in Burma during the 1990s, took a radical career jag in 1999 by plunging headlong into the pitiless UFO mystery. After a decade-long struggle for federal documents, of occasional victories in persuading corporate media to give the issue a fair hearing, and of banging against the inertia of mainstream science, Kean has produced the most important book on the phenomenon in a generation. *UFOs* delivers exactly what its full title promises. Hopefully, so-called “skeptics” who refuse to review this book will have the integrity to excuse themselves from the controversy it intends to provoke.

UFOs . . . on the Record is not merely a procession of authority figures reciting personal encounters and attitudes. It mines something far more abiding and insidious—the corruption of science in arguably the most bizarre incarnation of American exceptionalism on the books. With France leading the way, 13 nations from Europe to South America have published previously withheld UFO data since 2004; in 2007, 22 American and international pilots, scientists, and aviation experts signed a petition lobbying for the U.S. to start a new investigation of this global and potentially dangerous reality.

Washington failed to respond to that widely covered conference at the National Press Club. And as its rigid silence confronts mounting evidence for a high-technology component to the phenomenon, America finds itself the source of accelerating international exasperation. When retired Maj. Gen. Denis Letty, who organized a landmark French UFO study published in 1999, asked the U.S. to join its investigation, he and his colleagues received no reply. Retired Gen. Recardo Bermudez Sanhueza, who ran Chile’s government UFO project from 1998 to 2002, requested U.S. assistance through its embassy. “To be frank,” Bermudez writes, “we’ve had no response from the United States any time we’ve tried to enlist its cooperation” regarding UFOs.

This is not an academic exercise. Former NASA senior scientist Richard Haines founded the National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous

Phenomena (NARCAP) in 2000 in response to concerns over aviation safety. “According to our statistics,” Haines writes, “in an average career of commercial flying, a pilot has about the same chance of seeing a UAP (unidentified aerial phenomena) as he does of striking a bird in flight or of encountering extreme wind shear.” Haines goes on to cite three mysterious cases in which worst-case scenarios may have already occurred.

But without government channels to sanction the reporting of in-flight incidents, American pilots operate in a dysfunctional vacuum with implicit career risks. In one of NARCAP’s most notable investigations—the 2006 Chicago O’Hare International incident, in which witnesses reported a UFO slicing a circular hole through a low cloud ceiling when it departed—not a single United Airlines employee dared to go on record with the story.

Contrast this with the more professional culture in Brazil, where retired Brig. Gen. Jose Carlos Pereira declares “Our civilian pilots are not afraid to speak up, and they always do, because they don’t want to lose their jobs for *not* reporting unusual events.” Or with active-duty Chilean Capt. Rodrigo Bravo Garrido, who was assigned by the Air Force to investigate a harrowing encounter reported by an Army aviation crew. Writes Bravo, “It was because of my involvement in this pivotal case that I was asked to study the unconventional topic of UAP in order to graduate from my pilot training program.” And it never occurred to civilian airline pilot Ray Bowyer to shut up about his 2007 encounter with two massive UFOs over the Channel Islands, which he reported promptly to British authorities—without suffering repercussions.

Perhaps the more progressive attitudes outside American borders are best summarized by retired Maj. Gen. Wilfried De Brouwer, who staged a press conference in 1990 after Belgian F-16s proved incapable of intercepting triangular UFOs in its airspace. “It is not easy to admit that authorities in charge of air defense and airspace management are not capable of finding an acceptable explanation,” he writes, “but in my opinion this is better than issuing false explanations.”

In advocating a new government study designed to scrub the stigma of UFOs from American culture, Kean regards classified U.S. government research—the alleged X-Files stuff—as virtually irrelevant to the conversation. “Any behind-the-scenes endeavor would have to be so exclusive, so entirely covert, that in effect its existence would make no difference to our government or country, to the people who know nothing about it, which is essentially everyone.” A clean slate, she argues, is the best way to proceed. Enter militant agnosticism.

Kean concludes with some thoughts from two political science professors, Dr. Alexander Wendt of Ohio State University and Dr. Raymond Duvall

with the University of Minnesota. Revisiting a largely overlooked coauthored paper called “Sovereignty and the UFO” published in a 2008 *Political Theory* journal, they examine the roots of America’s refusal to confront the data in a public and transparent forum. And they offer a way out.

“By ‘agnostic’ here we mean that no position on whether UFOs are extraterrestrial should be taken until they have been systematically studied,” write Wendt and Duvall. “Resistance must be agnostic because, given our current knowledge, neither denial nor belief in the extraterrestrial hypothesis is justified; we simply do not know.” And then: “To be *politically effective*, however, resistance must also be militant, by which we mean public and strategic. Indeed, purely private agnosticism about UFOs, of the kind that people in the modern world might have about God, does nothing to break the spiral of silence that surrounds the issue and so in effect contributes to it.”

That sort of middle-ground activism—between the conspiracy paranoia and the flat-earth ostriches—is responsible for the much-buzzed-about Foreword by former Clinton White House Chief of Staff John Podesta, who also steered Barack Obama’s presidential transition team. It also generated book-jacket raves from the likes of theoretical physicist Dr. Michio Kaku, Dr. Rudy Schild of Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, and former Clinton White House Office of Science and Technology Director Dr. Neal Lane. If the U.S. hopes to overcome what Yves Sillard—former director of the French equivalent of NASA—described as its “intellectual blindness,” more figures of their ilk will have to step up.

“We ask those on the two sides of this outmoded contest between unwavering believers and nonbelievers to realize the fallacy of both positions,” Kean writes, “and to accept the logic, necessity, and realism of the agnostic view. Scientists must disavow the untenable claim that we have no evidence other than eyewitness reports, which are to them—of course—unreliable.”

The stage is set for an adult conversation. Unfortunately, that means its fate is now largely in the hands of the ailing American mainstream media, whose sense of identity and purpose has never been in a more acute condition.



BILLY COX

Billy.Cox@heraldtribune.com