



The Psychiatrist Who Flew Into Space and Never Came Back

***Corresponding Author(s): Robert M Kaplan**

Clinical Associate Professor, Medical School, University of Western Sydney, 316, Thirroul, NSW 2515, Australia.
Email: rob@rkaplan.com.au

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Introduction

Unidentified flying objects, invariably designated by the sobriquet UFO, remain a perennial source of fascination-and derision. Movies like 2001: A Space Odyssey, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Contact and E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial, radio shows like The War of the Worlds and dozens of other imitators have fanned the flames of public interest. This has progressed beyond mere public enjoyment to being a social and cultural phenomenon with distinct features.

With all its twists and turns, the UFO phenomenon has an interesting chronology and geography. Since humans became sentient, contact with supra-terrestrial entities has been a constant, occurring during trance states in individuals who are regarded as having special powers and designated as prophets, shamans, witch doctors, mystics or healers.

However, the UFO phenomenon per se has a recent origin. While predicted by writers such as Jules Verne and H G Wells, the driving event was the Cold War, which explains why it started in the divided Germany and Scandinavia, spreading to the USA and other countries [1]. Having started with sightings, after the Sixties it segued to claims of abduction by the aliens.

America, however, takes the lead in reporting alien abduction-is this because of its greater technological development or intense focus on materialism in the population? The Betty and Barney Hill case in 1961 can be regarded as canonical and laid down the guidelines for subsequent claims, which were remarkably similar [2] Others were soon to follow.

The backdrop to these events were the social changes that roiled American complacency after the sixties. The counter-cultural movement promoted hallucinogenic drugs, mysticism,



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Eastern anti-materialistic concepts and hostility to mainstream science that easily segued into conspiracy theories. The Cold War itself with the looming threat of ballistic missiles coming out of the skies added to the anxiety.

Liberal activism of the sixties was not without its social benefits, setting the stage for women's and gay liberation, as well as improved civil rights. But from this a distraught combination of feminist theory, anti-scientism and cod psychoanalysis led to an ominous triad of syndromes arose: false memory syndrome, satanic ritual abuse and alien abduction syndrome. Of the first two, no more needs to be said except to recall the appalling damage that was done to wrongly imprisoned persons and the destruction of so many family lives.

As the furore over false memory claims slowly settled in response to legal kickbacks and scientific criticism, several principles were established; the recognition of the unreliability of memory, added to which was the sheer unreliability of memories obtained by chemical abreaction or hypnosis. Time and time again it was shown how false memories of an extraordinary elaborate nature that bore no connection with the known facts started in individuals who presented with vague symptoms of discontent to a therapist who, by means of leading questions and hypnosis, implanted or resuscitated the false memories.

While false memory syndrome issues were (and still remain) conflicted in public minds, alien abduction to start with received widespread disbelief. For a while science was to triumph in portraying the physical impossibility of such events, the most prominent UFO sceptic being the astronomer Carl Sagan [3].

This state was not to last. The sechzigers Gramsciite Long March reached its apogee by the nineties. Science was now no more valid than any other postmodern delusion-for example, the belief that surgical/hormonal treatment could change genetically determined gender.

Which is where psychiatrist John Mack comes into the picture. A Harvard professor of impeccable professional status, he had won the 1977 Pulitzer Prize for a psychohistory of T E Lawrence a Prince of Our Disorder, founded the psychiatry department at Harvard-affiliated Cambridge Hospital, wrote and taught widely. A child of the sixties, Mack supported liberal causes such opposing the Viet Nam war, lobbying against nuclear war and looking at Eastern mysticism. There would have been few colleagues who would not have regarded him as a leading figure in American psychiatry.

Mack was a proponent of psycho-history and of using depth psychology to choose leaders [4,5]. Good looking and popular, his charisma was considerable and women flocked to his lectures and seminars. A trained analyst, Mack became disillusioned with Freud after Jeffrey Masson's revelations about how he had denied that his patients could have been sexually abused [6]. A search for alternatives (if not nirvana) led him into EST and regular trips with LSD and other hallucinogens. He was a regular participant in EST seminars and practiced Grof's holotropic breathwork [7]. As a board member of Werner Erhard's EST training (and regular participant in seminars), he seemed oblivious to the hazards of such coercive group therapy [8].

A Prince of Our Disorder is a guide to Mack's thinking. An otherwise orthodox, if lengthy, biography, it is a psychohistory finding that Laurence's drive and conflicts revolved around the relationship with his mother and his parents' unmarried status. This, allegedly, explained his homosexuality, attitude to women,

sado-masochism and highly conflicted involvement in the Arab cause. All very reasonable but facing the same epistemological problem as psychoanalysis: there is no way of proving or disproving it; one either takes it on as a belief or not.

For Mack the caput nili was his belief that hypnotic regression helped patients to recover repressed memories more clearly than could occur with conscious recall. As will become evident if one went further down the Nile there were to be some alarming rapids to navigate.

In the early 1990s, Mack made a startling announcement. He had been seeing patients who claimed to have been abducted by aliens and he believed them [9].

Mack's interest in UFOs was sparked by sculptor Budd Hopkins whose own experience in 1964 led him to play an active role in promoting other accounts. What started as scepticism soon changed to enthusiasm and belief in the cases Mack examined. He was ultimately to see 200 such patients.

In 1994, he published *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*, a study of 13 patients, surely one of the most controversial books in twentieth-century psychiatry [10]. A sequel, *Passport to the Cosmos*, followed in 1999 [11].

Abduction describes the "recovered" experiences from 13 hypnotized subjects: floating through walls to space ships operated by small, translucent humanoids; having tiny objects implanted; being sexually handled, penetrated, impregnated; having a foetus removed; seeing incubators with hybrid babies. Some subjects said that they lived during the Civil War or in ancient Egypt or had a dual identity as an alien and a human being.

If the concept of alien abduction is inimical to the scientific mind, there is an odd etymological connection to the psychiatric speciality, its practitioners after all had long been known as alienists in the past [12].

Mack had been preceded by David Jacobs, professor of History at Temple University, Philadelphia who published *Secret Life: First Hand Accounts of UFO Abductions* with a preface by Mack [13]. Jacobs believed that extra-terrestrials were kidnapping human beings as part of a plot to breed human-alien hybrids, going down the same path to become a hypnotherapist and advocate for abductees [14]. He did not, however, receive anything like the same publicity as Mack.

Undismayed by his inordinate and quixotic revelations, Mack was to tell *The Harvard Gazette* that "We may be witnessing... an awkward joining of two species, engineered by an intelligence we are unable to fathom. It is possible that hundreds of thousands, or even millions of people in this country have undergone abduction experiences". Contrary to the widespread belief, he maintained, physical evidence of UFO's had been uncovered; his case studies neither proved nor disproved the existence of aliens, but corroborated the accounts of the witnesses. The Western Enlightenment secular views had reached their use-by date and the new paradigm permitted the opening of consciousness to deal with "new domains of being".

As the storm broke following the revelations, Mack did not lose his cool, resorting instead to casuistry to duck and weave around the issues [15]. He soon turned up on talk shows like Oprah and Larry King to rapt applause, in addition to becoming a tabloid favourite. None of the screaming headlines ever failed to mention that he was a Harvard Professor. To critics who felt

this was inappropriate, he responded that it was important to promote his findings to the public.

An important prop to his defence was the work of a close friend: Thomas Kuhn. The idea of an outsider challenging the scientific establishment to produce a paradigm shift fitted perfectly with his self-image as a misunderstood martyr, to say nothing of the accompanying hubris. This allowed him to reject the proponents of Newtonian/Einsteinian physics while requesting scientific recognition at the same time.

Mack's most fervent contentions were unleashed in response to the film *Kidnapped by UFO's?* [16]. Far from doing harm by listening to abductee accounts, he maintained that such biased accounts drove them back into the closet. Sleep paralysis did not explain cases that occurred in broad daylight; in any event, it was an inadequate hypothesis (why?). The suggestibility and hallucinations that Loftus et al found in the population were, again, inadequate explanations for alien abduction reports; there was no evidence at all that such people hallucinated (as Carl Sagan suggested) [17].

On the same basis, Mack insisted – ignoring the thin ice that was by now cracking beneath the weight of his arguments—that evidence obtained under hypnosis was often more reliable as it excluded the censoring effect of the conscious mind. This would have come as a surprise to Professor Chris French of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit in London who said, “the problem with hypnotic regression is you get pretty much what you expect to get. If you go into a session expecting to recover memories of alien abduction that's most likely what you're going to get. If you go in thinking you're going to recover past life memories of being Mary Queen of Scots, then that's what you'll get” [18].

Once on board the orbiting spaceship of his beliefs, there was no limit to where it could take Mack. The visions and dreams of ancient mystics were, in fact, reflections of extra-terrestrial contacts. Even the prophet Ezekiel was not spared. According to Mack, the “fiery wheels” made it highly likely that he had witnessed a sixth century BC visitation of alien tourists. Any reader of Ezekiel will know that his famous vision was of a distinctly earth-derived chariot and there is nothing in the book to suggest any alien contact [19].

If this did not leave his astral vessel crashing back to earth, the clincher was the claim that Elizabeth Loftus was wrong in saying that there were no such things as ‘body memories’; why, he said, this had been definitively proven by his Harvard colleague Bessel van der Kolk [20].

Why was this the final nail? Van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score* was the *Malleus Malleficarum* of the recovered memory movement, a book that required as much faith to follow and heavily criticised by Richard McNally, showing that was inconsistent with scientific evidence, rather adapting the *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* (aka *post hoc fallacy*) logic beloved of followers and tracking all the way back to Freud's N=1 case studies [21].

In contrast, Elizabeth Loftus's work on recovered memory has received widespread recognition [22]. Memories are fragile things, change every time we re-consider them and are especially egregious when “recovered” by means such as hypnosis or chemical abreaction.

Mack also chose to ignore the work of another Harvard associate, David Hufford, whose definitive book on the history of

the Old Hag Phenomenon (sleep paralysis) left no doubt about the ubiquity of such events over time and how their content changed in response to social and cultural changes [23].

Then there was the awkward matter of Donna Bassett, a journalist posing as a so-called abductee (shades of David Rosenhan's pseudopatients! [24]) who revealed that Mack, after three sessions of hypnosis, had apparently believed her story of being kidnapped by aliens during the Cuban missile crisis, and witnessing a conference between Khrushchev and Kennedy held aboard a spaceship (but not answering the question whether Khrushchev asked for a Big Mac) [25]. Mack, accusing her of being a serial dissimulator, denied that he had believed her or – worse – been ecstatic at the revelations.

Once this sort of thing starts flying round the public domain, then matters that usually do not come to the surface are scrutinised to negative effect. Bassett claimed that Mack did not give her a consent form to sign and “made it obvious what he wanted to hear” at the hypnotic sessions. In addition, she claimed that insurance companies were billed for some sessions, which did not constitute treatment. Berkeley psychologist Richard Of she (a prominent opponent of recovered memories) declared that “the use of his (Mack's) techniques in counselling is substantially harming lots of people” [26].

Harvard of course has a large campus on which both the departments of psychiatry and psychology can be found. But the distance between the two institutions of learning became a yawning chasm when psychologist Richard McNally – something of a superstar in the field himself – and Susan Clancy examined a group of abduction claimers. In a damning study, they found that 10 individuals who reported episodes of abduction by space aliens were linked to sleep paralysis during which hypnopompic hallucinations were interpreted as alien beings.

A second study reinforced the findings, showing that adults reporting repressed, recovered, or continuous memories of childhood sexual abuse more often reported sleep paralysis than did a control group [27]. They concluded that people rely on personally plausible cultural narratives to interpret these otherwise baffling sleep paralysis episodes. In addition, people who reported having been either abducted by space aliens or sexually abused as children experienced sleep paralysis episodes at higher rates than do those denying histories of alien abduction or child sexual abuse [28].

In the book that followed, Susan Clancy reinforced the finding that the abductees were characterised by sleep paralysis, a history of being hypnotised and preoccupation with extra-terrestrial's and the paranormal [29].

Sleep paralysis is a common, albeit often-frightening event. How a person interprets, it depends on the available cultural narratives (e.g. ghostly hauntings, alien visitations, neurological disease) and their credibility to the person seeking to explain this remarkable experience. It is unclear why some people opt for an alien abduction interpretation, when others find more anodyne explanations for their sleep paralysis. The abductees they studied also had a wide range of ‘New Age’ beliefs that might have made them especially prone to make an alien encounter interpretation of their episodes.

Harvard University, it turned out, failed to share the enthusiasm for the tiny humanoids exposed by their star psychiatrist's research and instigated a lengthy investigation in May 1994, the inquiry chaired by Arnold Relman, former editor of the

New England Journal of Medicine. Relman said the inquiry was prompted by Mack's "astounding claims" that were not backed by evidence submitted to scholarly journals [30]. Mack was, after all, a psychiatrist and it could be deemed irresponsible to encourage patients to believe in alien abduction.

Refusing to take this lying down, Mack hired a lawyer and fought back. Support came from some prominent figures, like Alan Dershowitz and Robert Lifton, who regarded it as a freedom of speech issue, regardless of whether one believed in the existence of alien beings or not.

In the end, the committee threw in the towel and exonerated Mack in August 1995. Dean Tosteson urged Mack not to violate the usual high standards for the conduct of clinical practice and clinical investigation but he remained "in good standing"-in other words, a slap on the wrist. Creating a martyr was not a good look for the university and they chose to accept that what Mack was doing was ultimately harmless. However, his public image, except with the abduction set where he remained their poster boy, was never the same again and he was marginalised in the profession.

What is to be made of Mack's thaumaturgic convictions? The issue is not so much that Mack was wrong – he was – but why he was wrong? First, he followed a long trail back to Freud with the belief that the mind could completely repress unpleasant memories, which could only be released by techniques like analysis or hypnosis. Freud's reversal of his hypothesis that hysterical patients has been sexually abused, but rather imagined it, was then overturned by the recovered memory movement who, in addition, ignored the admonition about the dangers of hypnosis [31].

Secondly Mack was a man of his times-the Sixties-which was to produce postmodernism, that shallow and mendacious inversion of rationalism. This was coupled with immersion into such foppish tropes as the Age of Aquarius and faux-Eastern mysticism. Any man who could dive from the safe board of psychoanalysis into the feverish pool of Werner Erhard's EST was certain to be forsaking the required adherence to proven facts needed by scientists.

Added to this was the constant soaking of his brain in hallucinogenic chemicals, notably cannabis, LSD and ayahuasca, to loosen the hold of consciousness. While many regarded this as the essential armamentarium of the hippie era, few realised the warping effect such drugs could have on conscious thinking, let alone grasp of reality.

To many Mack's activism-anti-nuclear and anti-Viet Nam-were praiseworthy commitments. Who wondered whether these were the visible tips of the iceberg of irrationality, if not confusion, that he hid beneath such a confident exterior?

Above all, Mack-like a general fighting the battles of the last war – was not keeping up with the times The recovered memory movement was flailing under the attacks, hypnosis as a means of recovering the truth was discredited (remember the scandal of Sybil? [32]) and the DSM, for all its faults, was insisting on operational, value-free diagnoses [33].

In retrospect, it is not so surprising that John Mack followed the path of identification, if not fusion, with the UFO people. Driven by his hubris and neurochemical risotto, he had missed the boat and, once he put a toe on the Calypsonian raft of alien abduction, he foundered between Scylla and Charybis.

No one put it better than Harold Merskey:

When the intellectual faculties are only slightly loosened, there is no end to the developments that will occur [34].

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