The United Nations 1978 UFO Committee Initiative: A Personal Reminiscence
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Dedication to Joe Hammer.

1. UN 10-12-77 program
On a quiet Friday in early October 1977, the Prime Minister of the small Caribbean nation of Grenada made his way to the lectern at the head of the United Nations’ General Assembly hall. In a parallel universe the remarks he was about to make might have shocked those present,

2. Sir Eric Gairy
but Sir Eric Gairy had long since established himself as someone who took the unusual, and indeed the paranormal seriously, something which violated an unspoken rule among his colleagues in the diplomat corps. For the media though, the fact that the leader of any sovereign nation would make such a statement made his words newsworthy. They were, “I have myself seen an unidentified flying object, and I have been overwhelmed by what I have seen.” The Prime Minister then proposed the appointment of a group of experts to define guidelines for a UN study of “the nature and origin of unidentified flying objects and related phenomena.

Gairy went on to say that while his real goal was to see the establishment of a UN agency which would actually monitor UFO activity, he was willing “to begin modestly with a small committee to make a study.” Such an effort should be undertaken, he maintained, because he was convinced that UFOs were space “vehicles used by highly intelligent aliens of extraterrestrial origin.” Acknowledging his own predisposition in the matter, he assured those assembled that he “would keep an open mind, taking no “categoric theoretical stand on the question of U.F.O.’s.”

3. NY Times 10-8-09
The next day’s New York Times carried the story under the title, “U.N. Hears Call to Debate U.F.O.’s, and reported that the announcement “did not exactly stun the delegates – possibly because when he has come here over the last few years, Sir Eric has talked about psychic research, and the strange disappearances of ships venturing into the waters of the “Bermuda Triangle” not too far from his own island.” But the newspaper’s abiding question was, had the PM discussed the subject of UFOs with another witness to the phenomenon, President Jimmy Carter, when the two had met the previous month in Washington. Gairy chose not to comment on
this, but an unnamed White House official said the subject had indeed been raided with the President. How he responded remains unknown to us.

4. UN press release 10-7-77
Sir Eric’s request was the topic of some discussion in the Assembly three days later, the third time in as many years he had asked that such an action be undertaken. No action had followed, though he had been inundated with letters from around the world supporting such a measure. The media and a segment of the international scientific community were interested in the matter as well, he added.

5. UN press release 2 10-7-77
Such a committee, if established, would have three objectives: to study UFO reports and determine their origin and nature, to disseminate this information, and to work within the United Nations to exchange data, with the constant input to the UN having the potential to trigger an informational breakthrough. The Prime Minister also made it clear that his personal interest in the matter was not scientific, but political.

5A Grenada stamps
While the discussion did not result in an initiative, the nation of Grenada chose the moment to issue a series of postage stamps marking their Prime Minister’s beliefs, efforts and intentions.

5B. Grenada stamps 2
On July 7, 1978 the Grenada delegation again called “for open discussions on the very important subject ... a matter significance at this time for all mankind.”

6. NY Times 11-77
A week later Gairy met with Secretary General Kurt Valdheim to discuss the creation of a steering committee whose aim was to involve the United Nations in UFO research. Accompanying him were noted ufologists Allen Hynek, Jacques Vallee, Len Stringfield, David Saunders and Claude Poher. Apparently their points were well made because the subject was put on the agenda of the General Assembly’s Special Political Committee for later that year. This was where I entered the story. My interest in the subject had begun the previous year and I’d already been lucky enough to meet and be befriended by the three men who would serve as my ufological mentors.

7. Budd
They were Budd Hopkins, a fellow artist whose own involvement in the field predated mine by a matter of months, Pete Mazzola, a tough, no nonsense New York City Police Detective who also happened to be a crack UFO investigator, and Major (ret) Colman VonKeviczsky,

8. Colman
a retired Hungarian Army Staff Officer who had been in charge of that
country’s military photo reconnaissance and analysis during WWII.
Colman’s interest in UFOs had begun as a recently naturalized American
citizen the day that photographs of the 1952 Washington, D.C. UFO
overflights were published. His distinguished military background and
standing as a photo analyst allowed him to develop lucrative contacts with
leading camera film manufactures, and within both the Pentagon and the
United Nations. He was the person who introduced former Secretary General
U. Thant to the subject in 1967, and by 1977 he had gained the ear of the
then-current Secretary General.

8A. ICUFON Memo excerpt
As part of the upcoming UFO related proceedings, Valdheim had
commissioned VonKeviczsky to submit a paper, primarily addressing his
concern

8B. ICUFON Memo excerpt
that a misidentified UFO might someday set off a shooting war between the
Americans and the Soviets.

9. UN press release header
While still very much a novice in the field, Colman had hired me and
Antonio Huneeus, a Chilean American journalist who also had an interest in
the subject, to act as his editors. Antonio was my first real colleague in this
work and we were both thrilled to have a hand in such an august project.
‘Hired’ in this case was something of a euphemism; neither of us were paid
for our work, but I think we would have paid Coleman for the opportunity
he’d given us. Over the next months we worked diligently to clarify and
augment the manuscript he’d presented us with. The paper’s contents were
important and compelling, but English was very much a third (or forth?)
language for the Major and Antonio and I were faced with a world of syntax
problems, inverted prepositions, and other grammatical challenges, all of
which we noted in our corrections. Coleman’s heavily Hungarian-accented
English (which Antonio and I affectionately termed ‘Colmanese’), along
with his natural pride and stubbornness, tended to guide his textual decisions
and the majority of our suggested changes were politely declined, but always
with his warm thanks. Nonetheless the paper was accepted by Secretary
General Valdheim and Antonio and I were invited to attend the relevant
upcoming meetings that autumn.

10. SPC program 11-78
A snowstorm had hit the city the weekend preceding the meetings and
continued into Monday November 27, the day the meetings were to be held.
While this slowed city transit considerably, it hardly halted it, though I’m
convincing a good percentage of the delegates who should have been in attendance used the weather as an excuse to remain at home that day.

11. Agenda Item 126
I woke that morning in my loft in Chinatown and dressed in my only suit. I was feeling pretty full of myself that day, and why shouldn’t I? As far as I was concerned, would be seeing history made at the United Nations that day. I caught the number fifteen bus which took me up First Avenue and dropped me off in front of the United Nations complex on the East River.

11A. Meeting program front piece
Passing through security was a simple matter at the time and I made my way to the General Assembly’s cavernous hall and found an empty seat in the gallery. The scheduled 10:30 meeting was called to order at 11:00 and the text of draft resolution 126 was read into the record. It called for:

12. GA SPC2
“The establishment of an agency or department of the United Nations for undertaking, co-ordinating and disseminating the results of research into unidentified flying objects and related phenomena.”

13. Prime Minister Gairy & Allen Hynek
Prime Minister Gairy, pictured here with Allen Hynek, delivered his opening remarks with eloquence and passion. He spoke of his personal conviction that the matter was of world wide significance, but he caught me completely off guard by immediately (as in his second sentence!) veering off into his thoughts on ufology’s then hottest case,

14. Valentich father with photo
That being the the disappearance of the young Australian pilot Frederich Valentich and his plane only five weeks earlier as he described the approach of an unidentified flying object to his air traffic controller:

15. Valentich Cessna
“The recent report of the abduction of a Cessna aircraft in Australia seemed to be a compelling reason for the United Nations to assume its responsibilities and take a serious look at the UFO phenomenon.”

16. Valentich ship
From where I sat, this remark was directed specifically at Australia’s representative to the UN and the man glared back at him in what I could only interpret as straight-faced rage. The flat affect expressions on the faces of the delegates from Guatemala
16A Guatemala delegate
and from Greece in these photos
16B. Greek delegate
fairly exemplified those of all of the officials assembled in that hall throughout the proceedings, and on a certain level, I couldn’t blame them. What holder of this cushy, prestigious job looked forward to reporting back to their government that UFOs were real and that they should support Grenada’s efforts to establish such a committee?

17. UN Journal 11-25-78
Gairy then cited worldwide statistics on the phenomenon, interest within areas of the scientific community, the lack of emphasis which the UN placed on such universally important subjects, and Grenada’s deep interest in the welfare of all nations and peoples, and as such, that it

18. UN Journal close-up
“... was genuinely concerned about any phenomenon which might interfere with the fulfillment of man’s aspirations towards the maintenance of peaceful coexistence.” He then read the text of the resolution.

19. Wellington Friday
Wellington Friday of the Grenada delegation was the next to speak. He informed the body that the previous year the First International Congress on the UFO Phenomenon had passed a unanimous resolution supporting Grenada’s UFO resolution.

20. Hynek1
In 1978 Dr. Allen Hynek was ufology’s leading spokesman and he informed committee members that the scope and extent of the phenomenon was not generally recognized, and was so strange and foreign to man’s terrestrial mode of thought that it was frequently ridiculed by those unacquainted with the facts.

21. Hynek2
He referred to Gallup Poll statistics, the confirmed number of sightings worldwide, physiological effects and trace cases, France’s GEPAN group and their ongoing study of UFOs, the compelling need for the involvement of an inter-governamental organization’s involvement, and how such a United Nations sponsored initiative would speed the day when “opinions would be translated into firm scientific knowledge.”

22. Vallee1
Dr. Jacque Vallee followed Dr. Hynek. He observed that a new social movement now existed which was based on the expectation of contact with beings from outer space, a belief which was in many ways an emotional one and not based on fully factual information. Vallee saw three aspects to the subject: its physical manifestation, which should be investigated with the best scientific equipment and personnel available, its psycho-psychological impact on society, and the social belief system being generated worldwide
by the expectation of space visitors, a longing which was leading to the creation of new religions and cultural and political concepts of which social scientists had taken little notice.

23. Vallee

Vallee went on to articulate other problems which we might face in the future if the problem continued to be excluded from serious research and investigation and how only an open exchange of information on an international level could correct the dangerous trends of belief in imminent contact which he saw as an indication of the widening gap between public mystification and speculation and true scientific inquiry and findings. His final point was that the expectation of contact promoted the concept of political unification on Earth. In this sense the UFO phenomenon was providing an outside focus for human emotions, and that whether this became a negative or positive factor for social change would depend on the way in which these emotions were treated. Such were the challenges facing the committee.

24. Capt. Coyne

Army Reserve Captain Lawrence J. Coyne spoke next, describing a 1973 incident involving a United States Army utility helicopter which he had commanded.

25. Coyne ship

During its flight from Columbus to Cleveland Ohio, a red-lighted aircraft of undetermined origin approached the helicopter at a high rate of speed and positioned itself directly in front of Coyne’s craft. The unknown was fifty to sixty feet in length and of a gray metallic structure. Attempts to establish communication were unsuccessful and the helicopter’s controls were set to descend at 2,000 feet per minute. Despite this, the copter began to climb at the rate of 1,000 feet per minute. It was ‘released’ at 3,800 feet.

26. Coyne

Captain Coyne testified that all aboard observed the same unknown craft and were fully convinced of its reality and that the incident warranted a thorough investigation. A documentary composed of UFO footage narrated by Dr. Hynek was then shown and the meeting was adjourned at 12:45. My parents, who lived in the city at the time, had both taken the afternoon off from their jobs to meet me for lunch and we make our way down to the UN cafeteria. Upon reflection, I’ve decided to share the following picture with you. It was taken by a UN photographer in the rotunda of the Secretariat Building during the afternoon break.

27. Photo, Dad, me & Mom
You can deduce it’s the nineteen seventies by my father’s sideburns, my eyeglasses, and the lit cigarette in my mom’s left hand; yes, smokers were welcome to light up in the UN lobby back then. After lunch they joined me in the General Assembly gallery for the afternoon session which was to be relatively brief. We were in our seats before the scheduled 3:00 start and the meeting was called back to order at 3:45.

28. Aftn session summary
Former Astronaut Gordon Cooper had been scheduled to speak next, but his flight to New York had been cancelled due to the weather.

29. Gordon Cooper
Mr. Cooper had been the most outspoken astronaut regarding the reality of UFOs and Mr. Friday read his prepared statement into the record. It read in part, “… I believe that these extraterrestrial vehicles and their crews are visiting this planet from other planets, which obviously are a little more technically advanced than we are here on earth. I feel that we need to have a top-level, coordinated program to scientifically collect and analyze data from all over the earth concerning any type of encounter, and to determine how best to interface with these visitors in a friendly fashion. We may first have to show them that we have learned to resolve our problems by peaceful means rather than warfare before we are accepted as fully qualified universal team members.”

30. Stan Friedman
The ufologist and nuclear physicist Stanton Friedman was the last major presenter of the day and it was the first time I had heard him speak, my first UFO conference still being several years down the road. Mr. Friedman spoke with authority as he told the assembly that evidence in favor of visitations by intelligently controlled extraterrestrial vehicles was considerable and went on to cite some of the vast and varied evidence then available. He explained in some detail why the truly anomalous ones could not possibly be terrestrial craft and laid out a series of reasons which these other intelligences might have for such visitations. Friedman then addressed the question of why they seemed to choose not to make direct contact with us, and why the initiative on the floor was important to all of the representative nations of the UN. Some speculation on the number of possible planets which might harbor life followed, as did his thoughts on the implications of contact.

I spoke with Stan the other night regarding his memories of the event. He told me that he’d wished Dr. Hynek had come on stronger and shown more leadership that day and that Sir Eric had been less associated with all other things strange. He also reminded me that the primary reason for the
meeting’s receiving the minimal press coverage they did was due to the tragic murders of San Francisco Mayor Muscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk by a deranged former city supervisor that very morning!

31. Friday & Gairy
The floor was then relinquished to Mr. Friday who invited members to make suggestions and recommendations concerning the draft resolution. He assumed that a vote on the resolution would take place at a later date. Mr. Tubman of Liberia then requested that the statements made by the members of Grenada’s delegation be reproduced and distributed for further study. Miss Harden of the United Kingdom asked what costs might be attached to such an action. None were foreseen – for the transcriptions that is, and those assembled then approved the request made by the Delegate from Liberia.

The meeting was adjourned late that afternoon and I returned home to watch the news coverage of the murders in San Francisco and nothing on the historic events I had witnessed just hours earlier and two and a half miles to the north.

32. Grenada map
I was of course prepared to follow developments at the UN from there, but there were really none to follow. Grenada’s efforts to establish a UFO study program were left to languish in committee and died a quiet death the following year.

33. ’78 Assembly Called Uninspiring, NY Times 12-24-78
The New York Times covered its demise with characteristic condescension, this bon mot from their coverage: “The Assembly this year considered 129 topics, among which one of the few fresh items was a proposal by Grenada for a United Nations agency to investigate unidentified flying objects. This was deftly disposed of by an invitation to members to exchange data if they wished.”

34. Rebels Stage Coup NY Times, 3-14-79
Less than four months later, while Prime Minister Gairy was back in New York on UN business, his government was overthrown in a coup staged by Maurice Bishop, a lifelong political opponent and leader of the leftist opposition and admirer of Che Guevera. Gairy was called a “criminal dictator” in rebel radio broadcasts and Bishop demanded his extradition to Grenada, but the American government was not forthcoming and the former Prime Minister remained in exile until October 1983 when President Reagan, who was no fan of leftists and, like Sir Eric, took the subject of UFOs seriously, ordered the invasion of the island nation and deposed Bishop’s successor.

35. UN UFO program cover
Despite the Grenada delegation’s failure to successfully implement Agenda Item 126, my first serious lesson in the human and political implications which UFOs represent on the world scene remains one of the most important I’ve learned. I consider myself fortunate to have been some small part of those proceedings have done my best to apply the lesson it taught me the professional challenges I’ve faced in the intervening years. I appreciate and thank you for your attention.

Biography

5. Grenada souvenir program for Prime Minister Eric Gairy address to the General Assembly’s Thirty-Third Session, Oct. 12, 1978
7. United Nations Photographic Service, selected Nov. 1978 photos
8. General Assembly Special Political Committee Agenda item 126, Nov. 27, 1978
9. ICUFON Addenda to the Secretary General’s specific recommendation to establish a United Nations UFO Committee, Nov, 1978
10. UN Radio Press Release, Nov. 27, 2009