

5-2024

“UFO Reports Swamp Mississippi”: Media Coverage of the 1973 Pascagoula Alien Abduction

Jane Fort

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/honors_theses



Part of the Journalism Studies Commons

“UFO Reports Swamp Mississippi”: Media Coverage of the 1973 Pascagoula Alien
Abduction

by

Jane Claire Fort

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of Honors Requirements

May 2024

Approved by:

David R. Davies, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor,
School of Media and Communication

Edgar Simpson, Ph.D., Director,
School of Media and Communication

Joyce Inman Ph.D., Dean,
Honors College

ABSTRACT

On October 11, 1973, Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker reported that they were taken aboard an unidentified flying object (UFO) in Pascagoula, Mississippi. Hickson and Parker's abduction is now known as one of the most famous extraterrestrial encounters in the United States. In 1973, Hickson and Parker's story captivated the media's attention, and fifty years later, in 2023, UFOs are still widely reported on. This thesis utilizes the first-hand narratives from Hickson and Parker's individual books to provide a detailed retelling of what happened on October 11. This thesis then analyzes the media coverage of the Pascagoula alien abduction in its direct aftermath, as well as current UFO coverage. This thesis argues that while the media coverage from 1973 of Hickson and Parker's encounter was published in a hard news style, lacked complexity, and supplied only the facts, current UFO coverage is written as longform, in-depth, and often multiple-page articles. This conclusion was made by analyzing the differences in UFO knowledge, government involvement and programs on UFOs, and journalistic practices in 1973 and 2023, respectively. While in 1973, the Pascagoula alien abduction was reported as if UFOs were science fiction, recent coverage approaches UFOs more seriously with the release of new government programs dedicated to investigating unidentified phenomena. This thesis further serves as an insight into media evolution and how the digital age has made journalism more accessible, multi-faceted, and analytical.

Keywords: the Pascagoula alien abduction, Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs), The UFO Movement, media coverage of UFOs, media evolution, journalism history

DEDICATION

To my mom, who knew I was a writer long before I did. Thank you for not letting me bury my head in the ground when I call you claiming that I simply cannot construct another sentence. Anything I will ever write is dedicated to you.

To Harleigh, thank you for making me repeat this manta every time I worked tirelessly on your couch, “I am Jane Claire Fort, and I will kick this thesis in its tail.” Your support means more than you will ever know.

And to Heather, you will always be the first person to read my work. Thank you for being my second pair of eyes among everything else.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I cannot go without expressing my immense gratitude to every mentor in my life, both in and out of the academic setting, who has instilled in me an unwavering confidence in my abilities. It is because of you that I am the person I am today. Thank you.

To Dr. Davies R. Davies in particular, thank you for the endless supply of encouragement, Choco Tacos, and Shipley's doughnuts. My college experience would not have been what it was without your presence, and I cannot thank you enough for your support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	ix
CHAPTER I: Introduction and Literature Review	1
Introduction to Topic	1
Rationale and Research Questions.....	2
Review of Literature	4
Data Base and Method	7
Chapter Outline.....	10
CHAPTER II: The Pascagoula Alien Abduction.....	12
Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker: Life Before the Encounter	12
The Moments Before Boarding the Craft	15
Aboard the Craft: Calvin Parker’s Experience	17
Aboard the Craft: Charles Hickson’s Experience.....	18
The Initial Shock and the Call for Help	19
At the Police Station: The Secret Tape	20
The Days Following the Encounter	21
CHAPTER III: Media Coverage of the Pascagoula Alien Abduction.....	25
Looking Back on the UFO Movement.....	25
The Pascagoula Alien Abduction’s Popularity.....	29
Media Coverage from 1973	30

CHAPTER IV: Modern UFO Coverage	40
The UFO Phenomenon Today	40
Media Coverage from Recent Years.....	44
Conclusion	49
REFERENCES	51

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AARO	All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office
ABC	American Broadcasting Company
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CNN	Cable News Network
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
UAP	Unidentified Aerial Phenomena or Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena
UFO	Unidentified Flying Object

CHAPTER I: Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction to Topic

On the night of October 11, 1973, two men fishing on the Pascagoula River encountered something strange: an oval-shaped craft hovering behind them. Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker were two ordinary men living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and working at the local shipyard until they became two of the most talked-about abductees across the United States. Hickson and Parker's story has become one of the most well-known and widely covered UFO abduction cases. As put by the *Corpus Christi Times*, Hickson and Parker's encounter was one of the many UFO reports that swamped Mississippi in 1973 and continues to be reported on today more than fifty years later.¹

Hickson and Parker's abduction sparked UFO coverage in 1973, but the phenomena of unidentified flying objects has been a topic of discussion since the nineteenth century and saw a massive surge in the 1940s. During this era from the 1940s to the late 1960s, also referred to as the UFO Contact Movement,² several close-contact and abduction narratives circulated in the United States. Fear surrounding the beginning of the UFO Contact Movement was synonymous with the era of World War II; people often believed that these so-called flying saucers were weapons belonging to enemy governments.³ During the time of Hickson and Parker's abduction in the 1970s, in the era after the United States had successfully sent men to the moon, the movement progressed rapidly and produced an influx of questions about the existence UFOs and

¹ "UFO Reports Swamp Mississippi," *Corpus Christi Times*, October 16, 1973.

² Chris D. Bader, "The UFO Contact Movement from the 1950s to the Present," *Studies in Popular Culture* 17, no. 2 (1995): 73-90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23413704>.

³ Bader, 75.

extraterrestrials.⁴ Hickson and Parker's story prompted people to speculate if these crafts existed and if the U.S. government knew more information than it let on. In 2024, the question of whether beings exist beyond Earth remains unanswered; however, as materials from the U.S. Department of Defense have gradually been declassified, there is now more information to reference on UFOs than ever.

From the 1973 Pascagoula alien abduction to the present day, media coverage of UFOs has evolved from short, Associated-Press style stories to in-depth reports on how the government is investigating extraterrestrial occurrences. However, little academic research has been performed on analyzing UFO media coverage. Scholarship regarding UFOs and extraterrestrial life has instead mostly examined the history of extraterrestrial sightings over time. This thesis is centered around the first-hand accounts of Hickson and Parker, the newspaper reports detailing their experience in 1973, and how UFOs are covered today in the media. Through analysis of the reporting of the 1973 Pascagoula alien abduction, this thesis aims to uncover how media coverage of UFOs has changed over time. Another purpose of this thesis is to address the larger topic of media evolution, shedding light on how UFO journalistic practices have transformed in recent years.

Rationale and Research Questions

This thesis addresses an area of media history that has yet to be discussed in scholarly research – how UFOs have been reported on in the last four decades. While the topic of media history and evolution has been thoroughly analyzed by scholars, especially in recent decades with the surge of the internet, this thesis specifically explores how the media currently reports on and approaches the topic of unidentified phenomena. This

⁴ Bader, 78.

thesis aims to track how coverage of the 1973 Pascagoula alien abduction differs from contemporary UFO coverage.

Much has changed in the media landscape since October 11, 1973. Our society has shifted from traditional, older forms of media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, to the world of the internet, computers, and smartphones, where news is always accessible through a screen. This drastic shift in the news industry, along with the societal and political changes of modern society, has caused a transformation of journalistic practices. While UFO coverage from the 1970s in the multitude of newspapers across the country consisted mainly of facts-first, hard-news stories, publications today are prone to be more complex in nature, offering in-depth and long-form narratives.

Some scholars and researchers have discussed media coverage of UFOs and extraterrestrial activity but have neglected to address this topic in the age of the internet when this specific cultural phenomenon is more prevalent in the media. In recent years, there has been an influx of UFO coverage with newly released government UFO investigations from the U.S. Department of Defense and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The research in this thesis is important given the recent updates and findings about UFOs, along with the continuously significant topic of the ever-changing field of media and journalism. The contribution this thesis attempts to make in media history is to explore the intersection of UFOs and media coverage over time. It also aspires to open a discussion on how the recent coverage of unidentified phenomena reflects current societal attitudes toward these unexplained events.

The following research questions were asked to thoroughly conduct this study:

- How was Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker’s story reported on in the aftermath of the encounter?
- How are UFOs currently reported on in the media?
- What insights into the media does current coverage of UFOs offer?
- How has media coverage of UFO activity changed throughout time?

These research questions served as the guiding framework for this thesis and led to the goal of generating a well-rounded, in-depth approach to media history research.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on UFOs crosses multiple disciplines, including psychophysiology, sociology, media studies, history, and theology. Researchers have argued that scholarship on UFOs mainly exists in these disciplines rather than physics, astronomy, and other scientific specialties; however, some studies have been conducted that provide a scientific approach to how such crafts could exist.⁵ The broad themes that exist within existing literature about UFOs include the media’s role in UFO narratives, common traits belonging to UFO contactees, the history behind the UFO phenomena (including government involvement in UFOs), and skepticism from scientists. Reviewing literature about extraterrestrial activity brought to light potential gaps in the scholarship that this thesis aims to fill.

One of the topics literature explores is how the media has played a key role in uncovering UFO experiences and influencing public reaction. Scholars have concluded that when media coverage includes scientific and authoritative sources who debunk the

⁵ Greg Eghigian, “Making UFOs make sense: Ufology, science, and the history of their mutual mistrust,” *Public Understanding of Science* 26, no. 5 (2017): 612-626, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662515617706>.

existence of UFOs, people are more prone to not believe in UFOs.⁶ UFO coverage through the 1950s and 1960s typically did not address the question of whether UFOs and aliens exist, but rather opted for reports that retold the stories from those who had extraterrestrial experiences.⁷ While some studies analyze UFOs in regards to journalism, others analyze the character traits of those who claim they had extraterrestrial encounters. There are two themes that exist within scholarship that explain how nonpsychotic, otherwise reputable people could come to sincerely believe that they were abducted by aliens.⁸ One explanation is that they were actually abducted.⁹ The other is that they possess several, if not all, of these character traits that make them believe they were abducted: experiences with sleep paralysis and hallucinations, high scores on a measure of magical ideation (the belief in things like tarot cards, astrology, and ghosts), and familiarity with cultural narratives of UFOs/abductions.¹⁰ Historical studies track UFO sightings from the era of World War II to the early 1970s and government involvement in investigating UFOs over time.¹¹ At first, the U.S. government battled to determine if UFO/extraterrestrial reports should be accepted as real threats.¹² The government's lack

⁶ Glenn G. Sparks, Marianna Pellechia, and Chris Irvine, "Does television news about UFOs affect viewers' UFO beliefs?: An experimental investigation," *Communication Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1998): 284-294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463379809370102>.

⁷ Phillip J. Hutchison and Herbert J. Strentz, "Journalism Versus the Flying Saucers: Assessing the First Generation of UFO coverage, 1947-1967," *American Journalism* 36, no. 2 (2019): 150-170, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2019.1602418>.

⁸ Richard J. McNally, "Explaining 'Memories' of Space Alien Abduction and Past Lives: An Experimental Psychopathology Approach," *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology* 3, no. 1 (2012): 3, <https://doi.org/10.5127/jep.017811>.

⁹ McNally, 21-22.

¹⁰ McNally, 34.

¹¹ Alexander C.T. Geppert, "Extraterrestrial encounters: UFOs, science and the quest for transcendence, 1947-1972," *History and Technology* 28, no. 3 (2012): 335-362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2012.723340>.

¹² Robert P. Horstemeier, "Flying Saucers Are Real! The US Navy, Unidentified Flying Objects, and the National Security State," *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 187-188,

of response and investigation on UFOs led to growing public suspicions that the government was covering up information.¹³ Lastly, another key section of the literature reviewed involves scientific scholarship on UFOs. Scientists overall reject the existence of UFOs due to the research standards belonging to the scientific community,¹⁴ and they often disapprove of the theories belonging to ufologists.¹⁵ Such skepticism has led to a lack of research based in the field of science.

This thesis aims to add to the broader literature by expanding upon the subject of media coverage of UFOs. While some studies have tackled this topic, there has been no recent research that tracks media coverage of UFOs to the year 2023. The studies that reference the media's role in disseminating UFO information usually reference multiple UFO encounters. The research in this thesis will fill this gap, detailing how the Pascagoula alien abduction was covered in 1973 and how UFOs are reported on today. Through the analysis of Hickson and Parker's story and its media coverage, this thesis will also address several of the topics in existing literature, including skepticism from the public and the government's role in UFO phenomena. Scholarship on UFO coverage is important because it addresses how the discussion of UFOs has evolved from fiction to fact and how the angle in which journalists approach UFO reports has changed.

<https://sdonline.org/issue/42/flying-saucers-are-real-us-navy-unidentified-flying-objects-and-national-security-state>.

¹³ Matthew Hayes, "'Then the Saucers Do Exist?': UFOs, the Practice of Conspiracy, and the Case of Wilbert Smith," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (2017): 666, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.2017-0028.r1>.

¹⁴ Ron Westrum, "Social Intelligence about Anomalies: The Case of UFOs," *Social Studies of Science* 7, no. 3 (1977): 294, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/284599>.

¹⁵ Anne Cross, "The Flexibility of Scientific Rhetoric: A Case Study of UFO Researchers," *Qualitative Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2004): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:QUAS.0000015542.28438.41>.

Data Base and Method

This thesis utilizes available primary and secondary sources surrounding the Pascagoula UFO encounter. These sources were chosen to answer the research questions and curate a well-rounded, in-depth study into how media coverage of UFOs has changed since Hickson and Parker's abduction. Primary sources include the books from Calvin Parker and Charles Hickson that consist of first-person narratives from the night of October 11 and transcripts from initial interviews. Other primary sources are an oral history with Charles Hickson from The Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi and newspaper coverage from 1973 that includes quotes from Hickson and Parker. Scholarly research from academic journals about UFOs, non-scholarly online articles, and newspaper editorial and opinion pieces were used as secondary sources.

"UFO Contact at Pascagoula," first published in 1983 and written by Charles Hickson and William Mendez, a professor from the Midwest who flew to Pascagoula after the encounter to help Hickson share his story, offers Hickson's explanation of the night of October 11, 1973.¹⁶ Calvin Parker's book provides his story, a transcript from the tape secretly recorded in the Jackson County Sheriff's Department, and several photocopies of newspaper clippings about the encounter.¹⁷ Hickson's book and Calvin Parker's book, "Pascagoula: The Closest Encounter," were used in this research to provide the retelling of the Pascagoula alien abduction in Chapter 2. Reading Hickson

¹⁶ Charles Hickson and William Mendez, *UFO Contact at Pascagoula* (West Yorkshire, England: Flying Disk Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Calvin Parker, *Pascagoula: The Closest Encounter* (West Yorkshire, England: Flying Disk Press, 2018).

and Parker's accounts was crucial in the research process to gain a reliable perspective of the encounter.

The 1979 oral history between Charles Hickson and Dr. Orley B. Caudill was obtained from the University of Southern Mississippi's archival library. Studying this oral history offered new insights into Hickson's recollection of the encounter as well as Hickson's feelings during the abduction, his relationship with the news media in the aftermath of the encounter, and his beliefs on the existence of life beyond Earth.¹⁸ Similar to the interview transcripts in Hickson's book, this oral history addresses the Pascagoula alien abduction through Hickson's eyes. These transcripts that follow the pattern of question and response were particularly beneficial in piecing together Hickson and Parker's narrative and their individual thoughts on the encounter.

Newspaper coverage was collected from the online archival website newspapers.com and photocopies from Parker's books. To find articles relevant to this research, a search was performed on newspapers.com using the phrase "Pascagoula UFO" and narrowing the time period to produce articles from October 1973. Articles that were downloaded from this search included materials published on or after October 11, 1973, both in Mississippi and out of state. The articles from newspapers.com, along with photocopies presented in Parker's books, were analyzed based on the content, story type, and underlying opinions surrounding unidentified phenomena. Articles retrieved from this website and Parker's books that contained quotes from Hickson and Parker were considered primary sources. Examining media coverage in the Pascagoula alien

¹⁸ Charles Hickson, "An Oral History with Mr. Charles Hickson Native Mississippian," interview by Orley B. Caudill in 1979 (Hattiesburg, MS: The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at Southern Miss).

abduction's aftermath was necessary for this research to uncover how coverage has since developed.

Scholarly research from academic journals was collected through the University of Southern Mississippi's library and its online databases. An initial search was performed using the words "Pascagoula" and "UFO" to find scholarly material relevant to the 1973 encounter. Another search was made using "UFOs or unidentified flying objects or extraterrestrial life," and articles that surrounded UFO encounters and sightings, the history of UFOs in the United States, and scientific research on UFOs and ufologists were downloaded and studied. The articles studied for this thesis addressed the research question, "What do scholars say about UFOs?" Looking into scholarly research provided information about common scholarship of UFOs and how this scholarship correlates to current media coverage. This research also provides historical context on UFOs sightings that have happened over several decades, which established the significance of Hickson and Parker's encounter compared to those with less media coverage.

Other materials collected during the research process were non-scholarly articles from online news websites and editorial opinion pieces found in the newspapers.com search. Recent online articles discussing UFOs and extraterrestrial activity provided the framework for the media coverage comparison in this thesis. When performing the initial search on newspapers.com, editorial opinion pieces were found along with typical news coverage stories. These opinion pieces supplied insights into what some people believed regarding the existence of UFOs, which was typically not addressed in other hard-news articles from 1973.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and outline to this thesis. It details the scholarly significance of this thesis as well as the research questions addressed, literature reviewed, and the primary and secondary sources on which this research was based.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed account of Hickson and Parker's encounter. Beginning with a brief biography of these two men, then describing what happened on the night of October 11, and ending with the aftermath of the incident in the lives of Hickson and Parker, this chapter aims to provide the contextual narrative of Hickson and Parker's story. This section references first-hand accounts from Hickson and Parker's individual books detailing their experiences.

Chapter 3 analyzes the media coverage of the Pascagoula alien abduction in its aftermath in 1973. This chapter first looks back on the history of the UFO movement and the Pascagoula alien abduction's popularity, then moves on to the analysis of the Pascagoula abduction's media coverage. The purpose of this section is to discuss common patterns in media coverage of UFOs in 1973, to unveil how these patterns were reflective of the time period, and to differentiate the coverage from the 1970s to current publications.

The final chapter, Chapter 4, analyzes how UFOs are covered in the media today. This chapter begins with a look into the UFO phenomenon today and then compares the reporting discussed in the previous chapter to current media coverage of unidentified, extraterrestrial phenomena. UFO coverage today addresses the questions that were unanswered from in the 1970s, such as what the government is doing to investigate

unidentified aerial phenomena. This chapter concludes by addressing how the media has revolutionized its approach of disseminating information.

CHAPTER II: The Pascagoula Alien Abduction

Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker's encounter is one of the most well-known experiences in UFO abduction history. Hickson and Parker's stories have been thoroughly covered by the media and in their individual books about the encounter; however, their story has yet to be detailed in academic literature. This chapter aims to provide a chronological retelling of the events on the night of Hickson and Parker's abduction. This chapter begins with a brief biographical history of Hickson and Parker, chronicles the night of the abduction, and concludes with the events following the encounter. Including a detailed narrative of Hickson and Parker's experience in this thesis is essential to not only understand what happened to the pair that night in Pascagoula, but also to analyze the media coverage of their encounter in comparison to recent UFO coverage. Pages 11 to 25 of this thesis use Hickson and Parker's books as their points of reference.

Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker: Life Before the Encounter

When Hickson and Parker's experience with extraterrestrials hit the newsstands in 1973, skeptics were quick to claim that the men were insane, delusional, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. What neglected to be addressed in these papers to the public is the fact that Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker were two ordinary men who never imagined something so extraordinary would happen to them.

While details of Calvin Parker's upbringing have been documented in his books recounting the encounter, much less has been said about Charles Hickson's life before October 11. Hickson's biographical information included in this chapter was taken from his book where he briefly mentions his life before the encounter. Charles Hickson was

born on April 16, 1931, in Jones County, Mississippi, where he grew up fishing with his dad on Tallahala Lake. During the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, Hickson served in the U.S. Army for 20 months and was awarded five major battle stars.¹⁹ Hickson later became a constable in Jones County, earning him respect from those in the area. After serving as constable, Hickson moved on to work in Laurel for a company that built doors. Once the door company shut down and Hickson was out of a job, he, his wife Blanche, and their three children made the move to Pascagoula, where Hickson began his job at F.B. Walker's shipyard. Hickson and Blanche would have a total of five children and continue to live on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for the rest of their lives.

Betty Lou Parker and Calvin Parker Sr. welcomed their first-born Calvin Parker Jr. to the world on November 2, 1954, in Seminole, Texas. Parker spent most of his childhood in a low-income household in Sandersville, Mississippi, growing up alongside his younger brother and two sisters. The Parker family attended church each Sunday, and the pair of brothers would hunt and fish, work in the garden, and ride bicycles together outside of school. Parker's family prioritized love and hard work, and Parker would sustain those values throughout his life. Parker was an adventurous child and would often skip school to go swimming, claiming that education was a waste of his time. Besides skipping class, Parker never got into trouble; he appeared to have had a well-rounded and stable adolescence.

Parker's childhood home in Sandersville was where he met Charles Hickson. Parker's father and Hickson would often fish together and take their kids on camping

¹⁹ "Charles Hickson – Biography," IMDb, accessed March 1, 2024, <https://m.imdb.com/name/nm1495103/bio/>.

trips. Both families grew used to spending time together, eating at each other's houses and sending their kids to vacation bible school. One memory that Parker recalled about Hickson that speaks to Hickson's character was the day when the pair went fishing along the Pearl River. Parker abruptly fell into the water, and Hickson jumped in and pulled Parker out, saving his life. While at the time they first met, Hickson was much older than Parker and closer in friendship to Parker's father, Parker got to know Hickson on a more personal level as Parker grew older. When Hickson moved to Pascagoula to work at the shipyard, Parker, with his brother and father, would make frequent trips to the coast to fish with Hickson. During these years before Parker joined Hickson in Pascagoula, Parker gained a friend in Hickson. The two shared what could be comparable to a brotherly, familial bond; they would exchange stories, and each had their own way of angering the other.

When Parker received what would be his last spanking in the 11th grade, he decided to quit school and began working as a welder on oilfield equipment in Laurel, Mississippi. This position would prepare him for his future job alongside Hickson at the shipyard. When Parker got engaged to his longtime girlfriend, Dorothy "Waynett" Parker, he was desperate for a job that did not require him to be on 24-hour call and could earn him a stable income. Parker's father encouraged his son to visit Hickson to discuss working at a shipyard on the coast. Parker drove to Hickson's home in Gautier, Mississippi, a three-bedroom apartment where Hickson lived with his wife and newborn daughter, Tisha. Hickson successfully landed a job for Parker at F.B. Walker's shipyard. During the weekend while Parker stayed at Hickson's apartment, Hickson drove the two around town in Parker's yellow 1973 Rambler Hornet, giving Parker a tour of the Gulf

Coast. Since Parker was still in need of a place to stay, Hickson offered Parker a bedroom in his apartment that he could rent out for \$50 per week. Parker accepted, despite his initial doubts about the sudden move from where he grew up in Laurel. After turning in his two weeks' notice at his other job, Parker moved to Gautier and began working with Hickson at the shipyard on October 3, 1973, eight days before the night of the abduction.

The Moments Before Boarding the Craft

Thursday, October 11, 1973, began as any other day for Parker, 18 years old at the time, and Hickson, 41. The Mississippi heat still lingered and caused bugs to swarm the men during their shifts at work. Hickson approached Parker that afternoon during lunch with a proposal that would motivate them to push through the rest of their shift: He suggested the two of them go fishing after work. Parker initially rejected Hickson, not wanting to spend more time outside with the mosquitos and not having his own fishing equipment. Hickson ignored Parker's complaints and insisted that he had bug repellent and fishing gear that Parker could borrow. Parker was hesitant to use Hickson's equipment because, as Parker said, "to use someone else's fishing tackle is like using someone's wife."²⁰ After more convincing from Hickson, the two agreed to an evening of fishing off Highway 90 on the Pascagoula River.

Parker and Hickson left work early that evening and returned to Hickson's apartment to pick up the fishing supplies. Hickson told his wife that they would be back in a couple of hours, not realizing the events that were ahead of them. Hickson knew of an area where grain was unloaded from ships, making it a prime spot for fishing, as the fish would surface to eat the grain. Hickson and Parker planned to go to this area after

²⁰ Parker, *The Closest Encounter*, 17.

hopefully catching redfish at the old Shaupeter shipyard on the Pascagoula River.

Hickson and Parker arrived at the shipyard around 6 p.m., having taken roughly 15 minutes to get there from Hickson's apartment, but the exact time is not known because neither was wearing a watch.

Once Hickson and Parker arrived at the Pascagoula River, they parked Parker's 1973 Rambler Hornet about one hundred yards away from the waterfront. Tall grasses shielded Parker's car, which relieved Parker's anxiety about getting caught fishing at an abandoned shipyard. Hickson and Parker brought their fishing gear to a spot about 300 yards away from the highway with the Highway 90 toll bridge to the left in the distance. Parker notes in his book that "at this point neither one of us had a drink of anything, not a Coke, no beer, nothing."²¹ The air had started to cool down, and it was quiet and peaceful as Hickson and Parker settled into fishing.

After failing to catch any fish, Parker suggested to Hickson that they go to the grain elevator they had talked about earlier. As Hickson replied, saying to give this spot a few more minutes, Parker turned around from their place on the steel pier and noticed blue, hazy lights, thinking it was the police. Hickson turned around, going to add some more bait to his empty hook, when he saw it as well and froze in fear. Upwards of 70 feet away, an 8-foot-tall, oval-shaped craft with a dome on its top hovered a couple feet above the ground. It hovered in place, and besides the initial zipping sound Hickson heard, no sound emitted from the craft. The craft then began to expel bright rays of light, and its door opened, flooding more light on the area. Both men considered running, but Hickson also wondered what was inside the craft. Three grey creatures with wrinkled skin

²¹ Parker, 19.

emerged from the opening and floated two feet above the ground in front of Hickson and Parker.

These beings, as described by Hickson, had no neck, with heads connected to their shoulders, a nose that came to a point, and openings instead of ears. Their arms had hands that resembled a mitten-shape or a crab claw, and their feet resembled an elephant's. Two of the beings took hold of Hickson, each grabbing one of his arms. He immediately felt a painful prick in his left arm; then his entire body became numb to pain and feeling. The third creature took hold of Parker's left arm, puncturing it like Hickson's, and after hearing something like a puff of air, Parker also felt weightless. Both men floated into the craft, unable to move or speak. This was the moment the men last saw each other before they were deposited back to land after being aboard the craft.

Aboard the Craft: Calvin Parker's Experience

Once Parker was inside of the craft, the being moved to the left and carried him into a small room that was blindingly bright, despite its lack of overhead lighting. Parker tried to locate Hickson, but he was unable to turn his head or move. Parker felt as if he had been drugged, and he could only rely on his sight. Parker experienced symptoms similar to being paralyzed when he was laid upon a table in the center of the room and could not feel anything solid beneath him. The creature exited the room, leaving Parker suspended on the table at a 45-degree angle.

As Parker was on the table, a blue box the size of a deck of cards rotated around him, clicking four times. Once the box had examined Parker, another creature, unlike the ones Parker had encountered thus far, entered the room. Parker experienced calmness around this new 5-foot-tall being, which appeared more human-like despite its grey skin.

Parker heard the being's voice say to him, "Don't be afraid,"²² but Parker never saw its lips move. Parker sensed that this creature could tell he was frightened and was trying to communicate to him that he would not be harmed. Another piece of equipment came out of the wall and began circling Parker's body, examining him from head to toe. As the being left the room, the one that brought Parker on board took its place. It grabbed Parker's arm, and Parker began to float out of the craft and landed where he was originally standing, facing the river. Parker raised his arms to the sky, and as feeling returned to him, he heard a zipping sound like wind blowing. Parker looked up, with his arms outstretched, and saw the craft move up vertically into the sky and disappear.

Aboard the Craft: Charles Hickson's Experience

Hickson wished the two beings that had taken hold of him would kill him as he was brought inside the craft. Bright lights blinded Hickson as he was transported, yet he could not close his eyes. As he was taken aboard the craft, this was Hickson's inner monologue as documented in his book: "They will dredge the river with no bodies. They will assume we have drowned and washed out to sea. God help us. Where is Calvin? What have they done with him?"²³

In another room on the craft, Hickson underwent a slightly different examination. What Hickson referred to as a "big eye"²⁴ came out from the wall, stopping six inches from his face, and he felt another sharp pain in his left arm. Hickson tried to close his eyes as the object was in front of him but failed to do so, feeling the same paralysis as Parker had. The eye remained close to his face for a few seconds then moved to scan his

²² Parker, 21.

²³ Hickson and Mendez, *UFO Contact*, 15.

²⁴ Hickson and Mendez, 15.

entire body. At this point, one question kept reoccurring in Hickson's mind, "Why the hell don't they just stop me from breathing and let my life end here?"²⁵ After surveying Hickson's body, the eye went back into the wall, and the beings that captured Hickson returned. Hickson tried to speak, wanting to beg the beings not to take him, but he was still unable to move. The creatures carried him back toward the entrance of the ship, and like Parker, he was deposited back to the area where he was abducted. When Hickson's feet touched the ground, his legs gave out, and he collapsed. Across from him, Hickson saw Parker with his arms to the sky and a look of fear on his face. As Hickson crawled toward him, he heard the same zipping noise and saw the craft disappear into the sky.

The Initial Shock and the Call for Help

After experiencing their extraterrestrial abduction, the two men sat along the river in silence. When they finally spoke, Parker insisted the two of them keep quiet about the events that had occurred. Parker believed the experience to be too personal, and even if they came forward with their story, no one would believe them. After silently trying to process their encounter, Parker and Hickson carried their fishing equipment back to the car. Parker's Rambler Hornet now had a shattered window on the passenger side, and when Parker cranked the car, it failed to start. The car was new and had never given Parker trouble until then, but after a few tries, the car successfully started. Hickson took a swig of Jim Beam whiskey in the passenger seat, and while Parker wondered where he got the whiskey, Hickson ordered him to drive them home.

Parker was driving to their apartment in Gautier when he noticed a sign for the local restaurant TIK that served food and beer. Parker pulled into the parking lot, and the

²⁵ Hickson and Mendez, 16.

two sat next to each other at the bar and drank beers to ease their nerves. Parker was trying to forget what they had experienced when Hickson spoke up and claimed that they should call someone and report what happened. Parker urged Hickson to keep the encounter to themselves, but Hickson insisted that he was going to call the Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi and tell them that Parker had passed out and did not remember anything.

Stopping at a payphone on the way to Gautier, Hickson called the Air Force Base. After Hickson explained their abduction, the woman on the phone responded that Keesler did not handle such things and that Hickson would have to call the local sheriff's department. Hickson was shocked that the Air Force was not taking his story seriously. He believed that their encounter posed a dangerous threat to Pascagoula and to the United States. Hickson then called the Jackson County Sheriff's Department, and in ten minutes, the police arrived and followed Hickson and Parker back to the station.

At the Police Station: The Secret Tape

Once Hickson and Parker arrived at the station, they were separated into two rooms, and each explained their story. Parker lied and told the deputies that he had passed out, so he would not have to relive the fear he felt aboard the craft. Hickson, however, detailed the encounter in its entirety to Detective Thomas Huntley in his office, desperate for this potential security threat to be taken seriously. Once the deputies heard the story twice from Hickson, they decided to turn on the tape recorder hidden in the desk in Huntley's office. Hickson was quoted saying, "Well, this would be the third time,"²⁶ when asked on tape to tell the story again. After being questioned on their own, Parker

²⁶ Parker, *The Closest Encounter*, 48.

was brought into Huntley's office with Hickson. The deputies excused themselves, saying that they were going to get coffee, and left the tape recorder running to document their one-on-one conversation. The following is a portion of the transcript from the secret police tape:

PARKER: This evening I like to had a heart attack tonight, I ain't shittin' ya.

HICKSON: I know.

PARKER: I came damn near to dyin'.

HICKSON: I know, it scared me to death too, son.

PARKER: I'm just damn near crying right now – I can't.

HICKSON: I know – it's something you just can't get over in a lifetime, see – Jesus Christ!

PARKER: What's so damn bad about it, won't nobody believe it!

HICKSON: I thought I had been through enough of hell on this Earth and now I had to go through something like this, see. But they could've, you know, I guess they – well, they could've done anything to us – they didn't hurt me.

PARKER: Reckon why they just picked us up?

HICKSON: I don't know, I don't know. I'm telling you man; I can't take much more of that.

PARKER: I got to get home, get to bed or get some nerve pills or something, see the doctor or something. I can't stand it. I'm about to go all to pieces.²⁷

When the deputies returned to the office, Parker noticed a sudden change in demeanor. Sheriff Fred Diamond had listened to the tape, and now approached the questioning with empathy for the men who were terrified of their experience. Diamond told them they could go home at around 11 p.m., and the last thing Parker asked the deputies was to not tell anyone what happened to them. Hickson and Parker did not learn that their conversation that night had been secretly recorded until the next day.

The Days Following the Encounter

Once Hickson and Parker returned to the apartment the night of October 11, neither slept, and they woke up at 4 a.m. the next morning to get ready to go to work.

²⁷ Parker, 49-51.

Hickson drank coffee while his wife prepared breakfast and pretended as if nothing had happened the night before. Parker, convinced his clothing contained foreign bacteria or radiation, threw away his clothes and shoes from the night before in a garbage bag and bathed himself in bleach. Parker wished to avoid contaminating himself and others around him. Hickson and Parker left for work around 6 a.m., and as they pulled into the shipyard, their presence was requested by their boss. Reporters had been calling the office's phone lines all morning, wanting quotes from Hickson and Parker.

It is still unknown how the press learned of the encounter, but at the time, Hickson was convinced that Sheriff Diamond had leaked the story, despite Diamond's denial. Hickson and Parker only discussed their abduction with Diamond and his deputies, so they did not know who else could have told the press. In the days following the encounter, Hickson and Parker underwent radiation testing at Keesler Air Force base, which produced negative results and gave interviews under hypnosis to get more details about their experience. These interviews were conducted by researchers who had flown to Pascagoula once they heard about Hickson and Parker's experience. The researchers included Dr. James Harder, a professor from the University of California who was associated with the Aerial Phenomenon Research Organization, and Dr. Allen J. Hynek, an astronomy professor from Northwestern University. Ralph Blum, who worked at NBC at the time, also flew to Pascagoula to talk to Hickson and Parker.

Dr. Harder, Dr. Hynek and Blum wanted to help Hickson and Parker understand what had happened to them. Both Hickson and Parker commented in their books that the scientists they talked to in the aftermath of the encounter were sincere and concerned for their well-being, which was refreshing amongst the chaos from the press. Dr. Hynek and

Dr. Harder expressed their support for Hickson and Parker in a news conference held after they conducted their hypnosis interviews. Both Dr. Hynek and Dr. Harder confirmed that Hickson and Parker did not suffer hallucinations and that they had undergone a truly terrifying experience.²⁸ “They are not unbalanced people. They’re not crackpots,” Dr. Hynek said. During the news conference, Dr. Harder commented on the existence of extraterrestrials, “Where [the extraterrestrial beings] come from and why they are here is a matter of conjecture, but the fact they are here on this planet is true beyond a reasonable doubt.”²⁹ Before flying back to California, Dr. Harder visited Hickson and Parker’s apartment and left Hickson with this comment, “Charlie, if anyone doesn’t believe you and Calvin, they are a damn fool and you may quote me on any news media in the country.”³⁰

After the researchers left Pascagoula, the press continued to bombard Hickson and Parker at F.B. Walker’s shipyard. Hickson and Parker received two paid weeks off and hoped that the press would settle down when they returned. During these weeks, the two men faced different challenges. When Parker left one weekend to go back home, Hickson kept being approached by reporters at his door and at the shipyard when he went back to work. The attention surrounding the encounter increased when Hickson underwent a polygraph test with Diamond, his local chief deputy, which concluded that Hickson was telling the truth. Over the next weeks, Hickson received multiple letters and phone calls from the press and people who had had similar encounters with UFOs.

²⁸ Hickson and Mendez, *UFO Contact at Pascagoula*, 27.

²⁹ Hickson and Mendez, 25.

³⁰ Hickson and Mendez, 36-37.

During the aftermath of the Pascagoula abduction when coverage was at its peak, Parker repeated his story that he had passed out to avoid further questioning and reliving the experience more than he had to. The week following the encounter, Parker went home to Laurel to get away from the press and to see Waynett, his fiancé. As he left Pascagoula, Parker recalled sensing that Hickson knew that he was not coming back to Gautier. While both Hickson and Parker agreed they did not want publicity, Parker avoided the press more than Hickson. Parker refused to talk to anyone when he returned home but caught Hickson's name in the papers and his face on the TV. Parker began to question if Hickson was the one to leak the story. Parker tried to move on from the encounter and got a new job in Laurel. While Parker ignored the questions from reporters and strangers on the street, he could not handle the stress and suffered an emotional breakdown, and he was hospitalized three weeks after the abduction. Once Parker was released, he decided to tell his family and fiancé the entire story of what had happened to him on October 11. After confiding in his family, Parker did not speak of the encounter until his wife convinced him to share his story and publish his book.

The events on the night of October 11 followed Hickson and Parker the rest of their lives. Hickson and Parker made one appearance together on the Mike Douglas talk show, but after that, the pair did not see much of each other after Parker moved back to Laurel. Hickson stayed in the press, talking about his experience, while Parker only commented to get reporters off his back. The lasting impact from their abduction was only just beginning, as their story circulated news outlets across the country and became one of the most covered and well-known UFO encounters.

CHAPTER III: Media Coverage of the Pascagoula Alien Abduction

From October 11, 1973, to 2023, the press covered the topic of unidentified phenomena as government developments were revealed and as new UFO witnesses came forward. Hickson died in 2011, and Parker died in 2023, but their story has lived on through their books and the media coverage of their encounter. Hundreds of articles have existed in news archives from 1973 detailing Hickson and Parker's story, but on the night of October 11, Hickson and Parker had no idea how much their experience would be circulated. This chapter first provides a brief, historical overview of the UFO movement to understand the changes in unidentified phenomena from the late 1940s to the 1970s. The chapter then addresses the popularity of the Pascagoula alien abduction and the newspaper articles found on newspapers.com from 1973 about the Pascagoula alien abduction. The format, structure, and themes of the media coverage are analyzed to explore reporting on UFOs in 1973. The discussion of news coverage from 1973 provides the framework for comparison in Chapter 4.

Looking Back on the UFO Movement

UFO abductions and encounters have circulated in the media for decades, but it is important to note when stories about mysteries in the sky began. In August 1835, the *New York Sun* published a series of articles on what would be referred to as "The Great Moon Hoax."³¹ The *Sun* reported that Sir John Herschel, a British astronomer, had used a telescope with a magnifying power of 42,000 to spot distinct objects on the moon.³² The reports published by the *Sun* referred to an article from Dr. Andrew Grant in the

³¹ István Kornél Vida, "The 'Great Moon Hoax' of 1835," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 18, no. 1/2 (2012): 431, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43488485>.

³² Vida, 432.

Edinburgh Journal of Science which stated that Herschel had discovered that the moon had green plant life, herds of animals that looked like bison, and human-like creatures that were capable of intelligent conversation.³³ While the *Sun* later revealed that the reports were hoaxes, during the time of their release, the story captured national attention and was believed to be true.³⁴ The Great Moon Hoax was most likely the beginning of extraterrestrial and other-worldly reports circulating in the news.

Following the moon hoax of 1835, 1938 also brought along extraterrestrial hysteria. On October 30, the CBS radio network aired an adaptation of H.G. Well's science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds*, directed by Orson Welles.³⁵ The broadcast in the style of a typical radio news report made people who did not know it was a dramatization believe that a real alien invasion was occurring. Similar to the hysteria that followed The Great Moon Hoax in 1835, CBS's program caused panic, and crowds fled New Jersey where the Martians supposedly landed.³⁶ While the moon hoax articles and the CBS program were products of fiction, they started public fascination and fear regarding the possibility of extraterrestrial existence.

June 1947, following World War II, was considered the beginning of UFO sightings and encounters. Kenneth Arnold, a businessman flying his private plane, reported seeing nine saucer-shaped aircraft flying at an incredible speed in formation above Washington state.³⁷ Arnold's experience was published on the front page of *The East Oregonian* and sparked a trend of what would be many more inexplicable, other-

³³ Vida, 433-434.

³⁴ Vida, 437.

³⁵ Vida, 431.

³⁶ Vida, 431.

³⁷ Geppert, "Extraterrestrial encounters," 335.

worldly encounters. Within the following month after Arnold's experience, 40 more states had reported sightings.³⁸

While these "flying discs" were credible to some, many believed the sightings to be fake, or as a scientist observed in *The New York Times* in July 1947, "a mild case of metrological jitters" and "mass hypnosis."³⁹ The U.S. Air Force investigated these appearances, but by 1949 it had rejected the possibility of extraterrestrial beings visiting Earth.⁴⁰ The military's dismissal of the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrial creatures only increased suspicions from the public. By 1950, more UFO reports appeared across the world, including in Uruguay, Turkey, Mexico, and Austria, symbolizing what *Der Spiegel*, a German news organization, described as "an epidemic of flying discs."⁴¹

The beginning of the UFO phenomena in the late 1940s to 1950s occurred during a time of great societal change, with "the growth of civilian and military aviation, the Cold War, a science fiction craze, widespread fascination with the supernatural, changes in media technologies and audiences, and evolving journalism institutions and practices,"⁴² according to scholar Phillip J. Hutchison in his research on journalism and UFOs. All of these factors fostered public fascination with UFOs and extraterrestrials. This time period also fueled journalism, with news organizations reporting stories like Arnold's for the public's interest and as a contribution to the greater conversation surrounding the changing political, societal and scientific environments.

³⁸ Geppert, 336.

³⁹ Keith Kloor, "UFOs Won't Go Away," *Issues in Science and Technology* 35, no. 3 (2019): 50, <https://issues.org/ufos-wont-go-away/>.

⁴⁰ Kloor, 50-51.

⁴¹ Geppert, "Extraterrestrial encounters," 338.

⁴² Hutchison and Strentz, "Journalism Versus the Flying Saucers," 151.

By the 1960s, the UFO discussion shifted from sightings to encounters, the most famous being Betty and Barney Hill's abduction in 1961. Betty, a social worker, and Barney, a postal officer, were returning to their home in New Hampshire from a vacation in Canada when they saw what they described as a white star following their car.⁴³ This star descended and became a craft, and the couple saw figures wearing black uniforms and black caps through the craft's windows.⁴⁴ Under hypnosis, the couple told the story of them being taken aboard the craft, which they later described as a flying saucer.⁴⁵ The Hill story spread across the country, and the two became famous for their abduction and for not remembering being kidnapped until they were under hypnosis.⁴⁶ Similar to the popularity of UFO stories in the media during the time of Arnold's experience, UFO coverage remained popular in the 1960s. Most of the coverage came from smaller, local newspapers and were likely to be single-sourced stories without authoritative sources.⁴⁷

Hickson and Parker's encounter in the 1970s was by far the most reported on. While sightings and encounters had been published in the media since Arnold's experience in 1947, Hickson and Parker's encounter made the subject of unidentified phenomena familiar to most Americans.⁴⁸ By the time of Hickson and Parker's encounter, the media was paying attention to UFO phenomena, and UFO researchers, such as Dr. Hynek, were becoming increasingly interested in these unidentified objects because reports were now coming from otherwise reputable people.⁴⁹ At the end of the

⁴³ Bader, "The UFO Contact Movement," 80.

⁴⁴ Bader, 80.

⁴⁵ Bader, 80.

⁴⁶ Bader, 81.

⁴⁷ Hutchison and Strentz, "Journalism Versus the Flying Saucers," 165.

⁴⁸ David M. Jacobs, "A Brief History of Abduction Research," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 23, no. 1 (2009): 70, <https://journalofscientificexploration.org/index.php/jse/article/view/106>.

⁴⁹ Jacobs, 71.

1970s, after three decades of encounters and sightings, David M. Jacobs noted in his study on the UFO contact movement that three assumptions emerged: “Abductions were random adult-onset single events, the abductors’ intent seemed to be to study humans, and people were making contact with extraterrestrials.”⁵⁰ While UFO phenomena continues to be reported on today, 1973, the year of Hickson and Parker’s encounter, marked the last prominent UFO wave, and like in the 1960s, coverage mainly derived from local papers.

The Pascagoula Alien Abduction’s Popularity

Hickson and Parker’s abduction impacted both the UFO movement and UFO media coverage in 1973. There are several explanations as to why Hickson and Parker’s story was so prevalent in the media, but this section will briefly address two reasons. Assessing the popularity of Hickson and Parker’s story simultaneously addresses the Pascagoula alien abduction’s significance in the media and the UFO movement.

Journalists who have studied the news and media know of the values that deem a story newsworthy: prominence, proximity, timeliness, impact, novelty, conflict, relevance, and human interest. While most articles published by news organizations will not include all of these values, they will include at least one of them. From a journalist’s perspective, those who first locally covered Hickson and Parker’s encounter in October 1973 likely assigned the values of novelty, proximity, human interest, and timeliness to their story. Not only was the story particularly interesting, being about an experience with extraterrestrials, but it also happened on the coast where some of Mississippi’s largest news organizations were based. As observed in the historical perspective section of this

⁵⁰ Jacobs, 71.

chapter, decades prior to the 1970s included an influx of UFO and extraterrestrial encounters and abductions. Given the wave of UFO coverage in the media from the late 1940s to 1960s, Hickson and Parker's encounter became another story to add to the ongoing coverage. Journalists are taught to keep a well-trained eye out for stories, and as soon as Hickson and Parker's encounter came into view, it had to be reported on.

Checking news values off a list, however, is not the sole reason a journalist decides to report on a story or why a story becomes as popular as Hickson and Parker's. One element that stood out in Hickson and Parker's encounter compared to other famous UFO experiences from previous decades is the fact that this happened to two reputable men. They were hardworking, southern born-and-raised individuals with respected reputations. Fellow Mississippians had never heard of something extraterrestrial happening in their backyards until Hickson and Parker's abduction. Not only was it unheard of, but also both Parker and Hickson described their encounter in such detail that it was difficult to dismiss it as fake or that the men wanted media attention. Both men held to the same story without deviation. The only confirmed lie that was told to the sheriff's department and the press was that Parker had fainted and did not remember the encounter. Besides this mistruth, Hickson and Parker's story was fascinatingly believable. Once Dr. Hynek and Dr. Harder commented that something definitely had happened to traumatize these men, and as it was later revealed that Hickson and Parker's polygraph tests detected no signs of lying, the story gained traction in the papers.

Media Coverage from 1973

The articles analyzed in this section provide a look into how Hickson and Parker's story was covered in the media. This analysis will be particularly beneficial in comparing

how UFOs were discussed during the early 1970s to current UFO coverage. This section utilizes archival newspaper clippings found on newspapers.com to discuss the common themes in the coverage from 1973.

As mentioned in the historical background earlier in this chapter, most news coverage about UFOs in the 1970s originated from local papers, and the same applies to the Pascagoula alien abduction. Mississippi publications that played a significant role in covering Hickson and Parker's experience include *The Clarion-Ledger*, *The Clarksdale Press Register*, *The Daily Herald*, the *Delta Democrat Times*, the *Enterprise Journal*, and the *Hattiesburg American*. Articles were also published by states across the country, including California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas.

When analyzing the articles from these publications, a majority of the stories, both in and out of state, were written in a hard news, Associated Press style, stating only the facts and lacking commentary on the UFO movement itself. In journalism, this style of writing is organized by putting the most important information first in the story and the least essential content last. Below is an excerpt from an article published in the *Enterprise Journal* on October 12, 1973, about the Pascagoula alien abduction that exemplifies the Associated Press writing and the generalized lack of depth present in these stories:

Two Pascagoula men reported they were forced aboard an unidentified flying object by three creatures, examined and put out unharmed.

The report came from Charles Hickson, 45, foreman of a Pascagoula shipyard and Calvin R. Parker, 18. Hickson confirmed the incident but said he would not discuss details until he talked to authorities again.

Barney Mathis, chief deputy sheriff of Jackson County, said the men were ‘scared almost to the point of a heart attack’ as they told their stories to the deputies.

...Hickson and Parker told deputies about 11 p.m. that they were fishing on the west bank of the Pascagoula River near U.S. 90 about 7 p.m. Thursday ‘when a blue light hovered near them.’⁵¹

Another example of these stories that utilized the hard news style can be pulled from *The Daily Herald’s* archival reports on the Pascagoula abduction. This article shows how some reports were often short, leaving no room for in-depth reporting:

A polygraph operator from Pendleton Detective Agency in New Orleans Tuesday certified Charles Hickson of Gautier Believed he saw a space ship, was taken into a space ship and saw three space creatures on Oct. 11.

Chief Deputy Barney Mathis of the Jackson County sheriff’s department said Hickson underwent the test after 3 p.m. Tuesday at the office of his attorney, Joe R. Colingo in Pascagoula.

Calvin Parker, 19, who was with Hickson when they claim they were taken aboard an unidentified flying object while fishing on the Pascagoula River, is ill with the flu and did not take the test, Mathis said.

Scott Glasgow of the Pendleton Agency who administered the test certified that Hickson was telling the truth when he stated he believed he saw the space vehicle and its operators and actually visited the craft.

Mathis said the actual testing took less than 20 minutes, but the conditioning and setting up the apparatus along with the actual testing took about two-and-one-half hours.⁵²

The Associated Press coverage studied for this chapter was noticeably similar.

Despite coming from different publications, most of the hard-news reports on the Pascagoula abduction reused the same information. For example, articles from newspapers across the state used the same quotations from Chief Deputy Sheriff Barney Mathis, Dr. Hynek, and Dr. Harder, such as these: “I have got an open mind and I would have to see it. But they were serious and both told about the same story,”⁵³ “These are not

⁵¹ “Coast Men Claim They Were Forced Aboard UFO,” *Enterprise Journal*, October 12, 1973.

⁵² “Polygraph test verifies UFO story,” *The Daily Herald*, October 31, 1973.

⁵³ “UFO Holds Two Men Captive,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, October 13, 1973.

imbalanced people. They're not crackpots,"⁵⁴ and "Their emotions and very strong feelings of terror are impossible to fake under hypnosis."⁵⁵

One possible explanation for stories like these that lacked depth is the absence of adequate U.S. government UFO investigations. Throughout the peak of the UFO phenomenon from 1948 until 1969, there were three Air Force UFO programs designed to investigate extraterrestrial crafts and beings: Project Sign in 1948, Project Grudge from 1949 to 1952, and Project Blue Book from 1952 to 1969.⁵⁶ Project Blue Book was discontinued four years prior to the Pascagoula alien abduction, and after twenty-one years of investigations, the government was still remaining silent on the phenomenon. Dr. Hynek, one of the scientists who interviewed Hickson and Parker immediately after their encounter, commented on this inadequacy, saying that the U.S. government was not up to the task of studying something as scientifically complex as UFOs.⁵⁷

Without information from the government about these mysterious sightings, journalists could not create a complete story and relied solely on relaying the facts; however, articles could have been produced about the government's insufficient job of giving the public answers. Out of all the articles studied for this thesis, only one was found that addressed the government's lack of response toward UFO sightings that was not labeled as an opinion piece. While this story from *The Commercial Appeal* was only a short four paragraphs long, it brings to light the questions that were lingering in the minds of those reading and hearing about extraterrestrial encounters:

⁵⁴ "After hypnotizing victims, scientists believe UFO tale," *Hattiesburg American*, October 14, 1973.

⁵⁵ "They really saw it says UFO researcher," *The Greenwood Commonwealth*, October 15, 1973.

⁵⁶ Hutchison and Strentz, "Journalism Versus the Flying Saucers," 160-161.

⁵⁷ Hutchison and Strentz, 161.

Our government is usually generous with advice and explanations, but we've been left more or less on our own to form an opinion about the rash of UFO – unidentified flying object – sightings lately.

...If the Mississippi abduction took place as described, was it a kidnapping and thus a matter for the FBI?

...There are obviously more questions than answers. If this sort of thing continues, our government may have to give us better protection against abduction and some rules on how to conduct ourselves. Like many people, we have open minds, but an awful lot of curiosity about UFOs.⁵⁸

Other articles from 1973 addressed Project Blue Book but did not call the project by its name and only mentioned it briefly toward the end, as in this quote from *The Clarksdale Press*: "...the Air Force has not been involved in the investigation of UFO reports since 1969, when a study of the subject was completed."⁵⁹ News organizations did not opt for stories that explained the government's role in studying UFOs, or lack thereof, leaving the public unaware of the government's inefficiency, and instead published hard news coverage rather than analytical, in-depth articles.⁶⁰

There were several over-arching themes within news coverage from 1973 about the Pascagoula alien abduction. As pointed out earlier, most articles used a hard news style of reporting, but there are also other traits worth mentioning from the different news organizations listed earlier in this section. The stories assessed for this chapter relayed the details of the encounter to the public, but they differed in the language used. Some reports leaned more toward skepticism and used words such as bizarre, rash, strange, and mania and put terms like space craft, space creatures, flying saucers, and Martians in quotation marks. In journalism, each word and punctuation mark serves a specific

⁵⁸ "Protocol for UFOs," *The Commercial Appeal*, October 16, 1973.

⁵⁹ "Creatures from UFO examine two fishermen in Pascagoula," *The Clarksdale Press Register*, October 12, 1973.

⁶⁰ Hutchison and Strentz, "Journalism Versus the Flying Saucers," 161.

purpose, and the use of these adjectives and quotation marks around extraterrestrial vocabulary insinuated that Hickson and Parker's abduction was neither legitimate nor believable. Some article titles emphasized the so-called bizarreness of the encounter: "Something happened! They were scared to death: Coastians relate trip inside creatures' space ship,"⁶¹ "UFOs baffling,"⁶² "Pascagoula fisherman see Martians, ride in UFO,"⁶³ "Bizarre Tale Revealed: Green Men Really Red?"⁶⁴ and "Two Mississippi Men Recount Abduction by Space Creatures."⁶⁵

Another theme present in the media coverage was the reporting that Hickson and Parker could have been under the influence of drugs or alcohol during the time of their abduction, which also speaks to the perception that UFO encounters could not occur rationally or truthfully. Multiple reports included the quote from Dr. Hynek, "These are not unbalanced people. They're not crackpots,"⁶⁶ which reflected the assumption that Hickson and Parker's encounter was not an occurrence of real events, but rather the result of side effects from substances. Ridicule and harassment were common actions from the public during the different peaks of the UFO movement when people would come forward with their other-worldly experiences, and Hickson and Parker were no exceptions. What differentiated the Pascagoula alien abduction's coverage regarding this kind of reaction was the inclusion of quotes from the scientists in support of Hickson and Parker, such as Dr. Hynek, who said, "There is no question in my mind that these men

⁶¹ "Something happened! They were scared to death: Coastians relate trip inside creatures' space ship," *The Daily Herald*, October 12, 1973.

⁶² "UFOs 'baffling'," *Delta Democrat Times*, October 17, 1973.

⁶³ "Pascagoula fishermen 'see Martians, ride in UFO'," *The Greenwood Commonwealth*, October 12, 1973.

⁶⁴ "Bizarre Tale Revealed: 'Green Men' Really Red?" *Austin American Statesman*, October 15, 1973.

⁶⁵ "Two Mississippi Men Recount Abduction by 'Space Creatures'," *Buffalo Evening News*, October 13, 1973.

⁶⁶ "Latest report: Columbia radar jammed by UFO," *Hattiesburg American*, October 15, 1973.

have had a very terrifying experience. Under no circumstances should they be ridiculed. Let's protect these men."⁶⁷ Here are some quotations from articles that address the possibility of Hickson and Parker's drugs or alcohol usage as an unacknowledged reason why they might have experienced their encounter:

Chief Deputy Barney Mathis said both men were not drunk or under the influence of drugs when they approached county authorities with their story.⁶⁸ – *The Clarksdale Press Register*

The men were given a sedative and sent to the hospital after their second interview, Mathis said. He said they did not appear intoxicated or under the influence of drugs either time they talked to the officers.⁶⁹ – *The Clarion-Ledger*

Both men admitted to authorities they took 'a stiff drink' after they were released but said they had not been drinking before. Chief Deputy Barney Mathis said they definitely were not intoxicated.⁷⁰ – *Buffalo Evening News*

While most publications simply supplied the public with the facts in order for them to craft their own beliefs about UFO phenomena, some opinion pieces were published regarding Hickson and Parker's experience. These pieces arguably contained more substance than the previous articles mentioned in this chapter because they delved more into the question of UFO existence rather than simply relaying the story of the Pascagoula alien abduction. While opinion pieces can be highly influential in altering the public's opinion, analyzing these kinds of stories illustrate attitudes from the 1970s surrounding extraterrestrial activity and the Pascagoula alien abduction.

Jimmie Bell's "Everybody's Business" column in *The Daily Herald* serves as an example of the themes of skepticism and ridicule addressed previously in this chapter's discussion of language. In this opinion piece, Bell commented on the ever-present fear

⁶⁷ "Astronomer Says 'Craft' Landed," *Longview News Journal*, October 16, 1973.

⁶⁸ "Federals enter UFO case," *The Clarksdale Press Register*, October 13, 1973.

⁶⁹ *The Clarion-Ledger*, "UFO Holds Two Men Captive."

⁷⁰ *Buffalo Evening News*, "Two Mississippi Men."

that Mississippians felt following the Pascagoula alien abduction, and his proposed solution to this hysteria was transparency from both Hickson and Parker.⁷¹ Bell stated, "... when a quarter-million people are given a dose of apprehension so great they cannot look at the sky without watching for moving creatures, then they deserve at least a full accounting by those who claim their experiences to be so frightening."⁷² Bell called on Hickson and Parker to reveal all details about their experience, such as telling how many times the creatures buzzed or describing the creatures' every movement during the abduction. Bell's comments on the Pascagoula alien abduction and the influx of UFO reports since Hickson and Parker's experience reflected the assumption that the public during this time was facing real fear about the unknown but was not receiving any answers. Bell also subtly and negatively critiqued Dr. Hynek, "But so much about this one has been hearsay, because of the necessary rest period which Hynek suggested be imposed... What the public now needs is a complete story – preferably before the stars come out!"⁷³ Bell's perspective shows that while Hickson and Parker's story was present in several newspapers, the large amount of coverage did not equate to people understanding or accepting Hickson and Parker. While Bell touches on the fear of the public, he neglects to address the trauma attaching itself to abductees like Hickson and Parker, similar to many other articles analyzed for this chapter.

An opinion article from *The Greenwood Commonwealth's* editor, John Emmerich, in 1973 shared the perspective from a skeptic, reflecting questions in the minds of the people at the time of Hickson and Parker's encounter. Emmerich began his

⁷¹ Jimmie Bell, "Everybody's Business," *The Daily Herald*, October 21, 1973.

⁷² Bell, "Everybody's Business."

⁷³ Bell, "Everybody's Business."

editor's note by stating that he was logical and therefore believed many of the UFO reports that have entered newsrooms in recent decades were hoaxes.⁷⁴ While he described some of these reports as "pure poppycock,"⁷⁵ he also commented on the fact that even scientists who were experts in their respective fields cannot fully explain extraterrestrial encounters, which was an undeniable factor that contributed to UFO hysteria and curiosity during this time. Emmerich, whose opinion would have been respected as the Commonwealth's editor, confessed, "It is inconceivable to me that puny little man down here on our insignificant Earth could be the only intelligent creature in this vast, multi-billion-starred universe." He went on to say that humans can logically assume that other beings are capable of sending ships into space because the U.S. had done the same thing in recent years, successfully landing a man on the moon. Despite Emmerich's stance on the existence of other beings in the grand expanse of the universe, he did not go so far as to say he believed in UFOs:

Not at all. I simply accept the possibility that we may be visited by travelers from other worlds. And if this is possible, they could touch down in Pascagoula... as well as any other place on earth. And the first guy who talks to these visitors from another world is going to have one heck of a time convincing anyone he's telling the truth. I don't think I'm going to be convinced until I see one myself.⁷⁶

While Emmerich attempted to leave the question of the existence of extraterrestrial life up to the public to decide, similar to Jimmie Bell, Emmerich still contributed to the conversation that Hickson and Parker's story should be debunked and viewed as "pure poppycock."⁷⁷ This skepticism, or the immediate reaction to claim UFO reports as

⁷⁴ John Emmerich, "Editor's Notes," *The Greenwood Commonwealth*, October 18, 1973.

⁷⁵ Emmerich, "Editor's Notes."

⁷⁶ Emmerich, "Editor's Notes."

⁷⁷ Emmerich, "Editor's Notes."

hoaxes, largely contributed to the ridicule of UFO researchers and abductees and the lack of open-minded discussion about extraterrestrial life.

Assumptions about attitudes regarding UFO phenomena can be drawn from analyzing the language utilized in these articles, but journalists themselves hardly ever made direct, in-depth comments about these attitudes or the UFO climate in general. Coverage was published solely for human interest and to retell experiences rather than to delve into the mysteries behind extraterrestrial activity, what this activity meant regarding what we know about the world, and how or if the government was investigating these occurrences. This reactive coverage from 1973 greatly differs from the more analytical, in-depth, and investigative UFO reports from today's news organizations.

CHAPTER IV: Modern UFO Coverage

The Pascagoula alien abduction is an example of the prevalent UFO narrative that circulated in the media during the peak of the UFO movement from the 1940s to the early 1970s. Hickson and Parker's story was covered primarily in the days to weeks following the abduction, but their story continues to be reported on today on anniversaries of the encounter and upon their deaths. Broader UFO coverage today, however, has transformed from retelling UFO narratives to larger discussions on legitimizing the topic of UFOs. This chapter will use the articles analyzed from Chapter 3 and recent reports from popular news websites to assess how media coverage of unidentified and extraterrestrial phenomena has evolved from 1973 to the present day. Chapter 4 will first touch on UFO developments that have surfaced in recent years with new government reports and how the current UFO climate differs from the time of the Pascagoula alien abduction. The chapter then discusses modern UFO media coverage and how recent coverage serves as a representation of the evolution of modern media. While some reports about UFOs today take shape as hard news stories similar to those from 1973, most take an in-depth, longform approach and acknowledge the existence of UFOs.

The UFO Phenomenon Today

In 2023, there is still no direct, affirmative answer to the question of extraterrestrial existence, but new government programs are dedicated to investigating unidentified phenomena. This section aims to provide a brief timeline of the most significant findings regarding UFOs in recent years. The purpose of this section, similar to detailing the UFO movement from 1947 to 1973 in Chapter 3, is to set the scene for the media coverage discussed later in this chapter. It is crucial to note the political,

technological, and societal differences that have developed since the Pascagoula alien abduction in order to fully understand why current UFO coverage has changed.

As discussed in the previous chapter, a justification for the lack of in-depth UFO coverage from 1973 was the government's lack of adequate, productive investigation. At the time of the Pascagoula alien abduction, UFOs were deemed science fiction rather than science, and a majority, excluding ufologists, refused to take these unidentified sightings seriously. While there is still a population that deems extraterrestrial phenomena as fake or illogical, some scientists and government officials have acknowledged UFOs as real, thus leading to the formation of new investigative organizations.

After Project Blue Book ended in 1969, sightings still persisted, but it was not until 1995 that a new page turned in modern UFO scholarship.⁷⁸ Robert Bigelow, a businessman, created the National Institute for Discovery Science, a small group that convened in Las Vegas to talk about extraterrestrial life. This group included two former astronauts and Harry Reid, a sitting U.S. senator. Despite the belief that participating in the conversation curated by Bigelow would ruin his career, Reid became a key figure in restarting government investigations of UFOs.⁷⁹ In 2007, once he was the Senate's majority leader, Reid backed up the Pentagon's new Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, which funded research conducted by Bigelow's aerospace company.⁸⁰ The program looked into the documentation of UFO sightings and studied

⁷⁸ Joel Mathis, "What We Know from Decades of UFO Government Investigations," National Geographic, July 6, 2023, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/ufo-alien-spacecraft-investigation-timeline./>.

⁷⁹ Mathis, "What We Know from Decades."

⁸⁰ Helene Cooper, Ralph Blumenthal, and Leslie Kean, "Glowing Auras and 'Black Money': The Pentagon's Mysterious U.F.O. Program," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/us/politics/pentagon-program-ufo-harry-reid.html>.

footage from military aircraft that encountered unidentified phenomena. Once it was deemed that the program had made substantive discoveries, Reid requested more security to protect its findings, which was denied by the Pentagon in 2009.⁸¹ The Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program stopped receiving government funding in 2012, but Luis Elizondo, the military intelligence official who ran the program, continued to work with Navy and Central Intelligence Agency officials.⁸² The program was highly classified and kept away from the public until 2017, when Elizondo resigned and went to the *New York Times* with his story, calling out the Pentagon for not putting more time and effort into the research.⁸³ The government refused to fully dedicate research into UFOs; however, this became the first instance where someone complained out about this oversight publicly, leading to another widespread wave of UFO interest and curiosity.

The 2020s brought along new government programs intended to investigate UFO reports. In August 2020, the Pentagon announced the Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force, its second program dedicated to “improve its understanding of, and gain insight into, the nature and origins of [unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP)].”⁸⁴ In 2021, The Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a preliminary assessment of unidentified aerial phenomena, which reported, “The limited amount of high-quality reporting on unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) hampers our ability to draw firm

⁸¹ Cooper, Blumenthal, and Kean, “Glowing Auras.”

⁸² Cooper, Blumenthal, and Kean, “Glowing Auras.”

⁸³ Cooper, Blumenthal, and Kean, “Glowing Auras.”

⁸⁴ “Establishment of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force,” U.S. Department of Defense, August 14, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2314065/establishment-of-unidentified-aerial-phenomena-task-force/>.

conclusions about the nature or intent of UAP.”⁸⁵ The nine-page report reported that while data was limited, the information that was available showed that UAPs appear to have advanced technology that allows them to “remain stationary in winds aloft, move against the wind, maneuver abruptly, or move at a considerable speed, without discernable means of propulsion.”⁸⁶ The formation of the Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force and the release of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence’s assessment signified that steps were being made toward studying UFOs but proved that more data was needed to produce answers.

In July 2022, the Pentagon extended its UFO investigation to the formation of the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), which focuses its efforts in detecting and identifying objects that pose threats to national security.⁸⁷ The AARO introduced a change in the meaning of UAPs, which now stands for unidentified anomalous phenomena to include “anomalous, unidentified space, airborne, submerged and transmedium objects.”⁸⁸ The AARO has its own website at which the public can read about UAP cases and submit a report. NASA also entered the discussion in 2022, announcing its independent study program on UAPs.⁸⁹ In 2023, NASA released this report to the public, which recommended that “NASA play a prominent role in the whole-of-government effort to understand UAP... [with] a comprehensive, evidence-

⁸⁵ “Preliminary Assessment: Unidentified Aerial Phenomena,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, June 25, 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Preliminary-Assessment-UAP-20210625.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Preliminary Assessment.”

⁸⁷ “DoD Announces the Establishment of the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office,” U.S. Department of Defense, July 20, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3100053/dod-announces-the-establishment-of-the-all-domain-anomaly-resolution-office/>.

⁸⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, “DoD Announces.”

⁸⁹ Mathis, “What We Know from Decades.”

based approach that is rooted in the scientific method.”⁹⁰ NASA also confirmed statements made by the Pentagon that there is an overall lack of comprehensive data on UAPs, which has prevented confirming or denying the existence of extraterrestrial life.⁹¹

Media Coverage from Recent Years

The media coverage analyzed in this section takes multiple forms, including hard news stories similar to the 1970s, but mostly in-depth articles from mainstream news organizations. This section aims to compare the common styles and themes of UFO coverage from the 1970s to current coverage, addressing the recent journalistic shift into publishing complex, longform stories that legitimize UFOs. While in 1973, journalists had no reports from the government to reference and opted for less analytical, hard news stories, journalists today have much more to cover given the new government programs detailed in the previous section. The modern digital media landscape has transformed journalism, making UFO media coverage more accessible and popular. Extraterrestrial phenomena are also taken more seriously now that the government is publicly addressing and investigating UFOs as potential national security threats, thus making coverage less skeptical. Lastly, recent coverage is more in-depth and analytical and more often addresses the larger topics of science, politics, and human existence.

The UFO coverage from the 1970s neglected to address the possibility of the existence of life beyond Earth, as it was rooted in the belief that UFOs were bizarre tales of fiction. Due to the lack of answers from the government, the public was left to create their own opinions on UFOs. Articles today that cover things like the Department of

⁹⁰ “Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Independent Study Team Report,” NASA, September 14, 2023, <https://smd-cms.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/uap-independent-study-team-final-report.pdf>.

⁹¹ NASA, “Independent Study Team Report.”

Defense's multiple press releases about new UAP information and NASA's independent study program tend to cater to unanswered questions, which is a stark contrast from the style of reporting from the 1970s that only supplied a recount of extraterrestrial encounters. For example, in early 2023, after the Department of Defense announced that it would be establishing the All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office, an article from *The Hill* focused entirely on addressing the top 10 questions that the AARO should aim to answer, one being, "How many UAP-related videos and images are in AARO's possession?"⁹² Many people today, like in the 1970s, fear that UFOs could pose a national security threat, so it is the press and government's duty to supply the public as much information as possible. In recent years, UFO reports have successfully supplied this information as new government investigations have been formed.

With the release of government UFO reports, recent UFO coverage is approached and studied as fact rather than science fiction. Compared to the titles referenced in Chapter 3, which implied skepticism, headlines from recent articles portray a more serious approach to the conversation of UFOs, such as "How the Pentagon Started Taking U.F.O.S Seriously,"⁹³ "What we actually know about aliens, according to science,"⁹⁴ and "U.S. government wants to move conversation around UFOs from speculation to science."⁹⁵ Now that the government is creating organizations dedicated to studying

⁹² Marik Von Rennenkampff, "10 Key questions for this week's historic UFO hearing," *The Hill*, April 17, 2023, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3953558-10-key-questions-for-this-weeks-historic-ufo-hearing/>.

⁹³ Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "How the Pentagon Started Taking U.F.O.s Seriously," *The New Yorker*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/05/10/how-the-pentagon-started-taking-ufos-seriously>.

⁹⁴ Joel Achenbach, "What we actually know about aliens, according to science," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2023/11/25/aliens-uaps-scientific-evidence/>.

⁹⁵ Magdalena Petrova, "U.S. government wants to move conversation around UFOs from speculation to science," CNBC, October 17, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/10/17/-us-changing-conversation-around-ufos-from-speculation-to-science.html>.

UFOs, the narrative in media coverage is no longer centered around extraterrestrial encounters being fake. Instead of having obscure opinions that suggest skepticism and ridicule in articles, news organizations are currently taking the government's stance on publicizing and legitimizing the study of unidentified phenomena.⁹⁶ One example of publications acknowledging the existence of UFOs is this excerpt from a news story from September 2023 about NASA's new UFO research director from *The New York Times*:

Pledging a new, transparent, scientifically rigorous look at U.F.O.s, NASA on Thursday said it had appointed a director of research on the topic---and then kept the name of the director a secret for about seven hours.

The new position is part of NASA's response to recommendations made by an independent study team that the agency had convened. The panel looked at how to better gather and study information about "unidentified anomalous phenomena," or U.A.P. – the modern term for U.F.O.s.

The panel's report, released on Thursday, did not attempt to provide a definitive answer to whether galaxy-trotting extraterrestrials are zipping through Earth's skies. But it does propose a bigger role for NASA in tackling the question.⁹⁷

While this article resembles a breaking news story, announcing UFO news to the public, it also approaches UFOs entirely differently than coverage from 1973. This story supplies facts while also addressing previous failed and inadequate attempts at studying UFOs, the current scientific angle that is used when discussing UFOs, and the questions that remain unanswered in the minds of the public.

Current UFO stories that use the hard news style are typically either similar to the referenced *New York Times* article or are part of live-update webpages pertaining to UFO news from outlets like the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), CBS, the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), and the Cable News Network (CNN). In 2021, with the

⁹⁶ Petrova, "U.S. government wants."

⁹⁷ Kenneth Chang, "NASA Introduces New U.F.O. Research Director," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/14/science/nasa-ufo-uap-report.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

release of the U.S. intelligence community’s unclassified report on unidentified phenomena, CNN had a live coverage page that was continuously updated with the latest news. CNN’s breaking UFO news page contained multiple short updates, such as this three-paragraph post:

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said earlier this month that the US takes reports of any and all incursions of US airspace “very seriously” and investigates each one.

“I will say that we take reports of incursions into our airspace by any aircraft, identified or on identify, very seriously and investigate each one. Safety and security of our personnel, of our operations are a paramount concern,” Psaki said at a June 4 White House press briefing before the U.S. intelligence released their report on UFO’s.”

Psaki would not say whether or not President Biden has been briefed on the upcoming report.⁹⁸

The stories found on these breaking news pages are similar to the 1973 coverage, but there is also an overwhelming amount of longform, in-depth and analytical articles. Rather than supplying the bare-bone facts like coverage did in 1973, popular publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Vanity Fair* have published complex and multi-page stories about UFOs. Articles from these publications have taken UFOs more seriously now that the government acknowledges them and have demonstrated an openness in exploring the existence of other life forms. Below are quotes from the longform stories that embody this notable difference in current UFO coverage:

Only a small fraction of our galaxy has been studied. Absence of evidence, as everyone knows, is not evidence of absence... We are a social species. And finding others out there would give us hope, demonstrating that this remarkable

⁹⁸ Jason Hoffman, “White House on UFO report earlier this month: ‘We take reports of incursions into our airspace... very seriously,’” CNN, June 25, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/pentagon-ufo-report/index.html>.

evolutionary adaptation of intelligence is sustainable and is not ultimately self-destructive.⁹⁹ – *The Washington Post*

The government may or may not care about the resolution of the U.F.O. enigma. But, in throwing up its hands and granting that there are things it simply cannot figure out, it has relaxed its grip on the taboo.¹⁰⁰ – *The New Yorker*

Current officials are now concerned about the potential threat represented by the very real, advanced technological objects: how close they can come to our fighter jets, sometimes causing a near miss, and the risk that our adversaries may acquire the technology demonstrated by the objects before we do. So if U.F.O.s are no longer a matter of belief, what are they and how do they do what they do?¹⁰¹ – *The New York Times*

Also included in this new digital approach to UFO journalism are podcasts, particularly the episode titled “Why UFOs Freak Out the Government” from *Vanity Fair*.¹⁰² While in a different medium, this episode obtains the same traits as the written articles mentioned above. Here is a typical quote from the episode that exemplifies the much more thought-provoking content that is found in current coverage:

This, at one level, is, yes, the story of aliens, the stories of extraterrestrials, of UFOs, intelligent life out there in the universe. But mostly, this is actually a story about us. Mostly, this is a story about humans and US politics and geopolitics. And this very deep, fundamental question, in some ways the most fundamental question of human existence, which is: Where do we fit in the universe?¹⁰³

What makes these stories more compelling than those of 1973 is that they open a discussion about the possibility of other creatures existing in the universe, comment on UFOs in a serious tone rather than one rooted in skepticism, and inform the public of new updates from government research, which are all elements the coverage of Pascagoula alien abduction failed to address.

⁹⁹ Achenbach, “What we actually know.”

¹⁰⁰ Lewis-Kraus, “How the Pentagon.”

¹⁰¹ Ralph Blumenthal and Leslie Kean, “Do We Believe in U.F.O.s.? That’s the Wrong Question,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/insider/UFO-reporting.html?searchResultPosition=25>.

¹⁰² Brian Stelter, “Why UFOs Freak Out the Government,” *Vanity Fair*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/11/why-ufos-freak-out-the-government>.

¹⁰³ Stelter, “Why UFOs Freak Out.”

Conclusion

UFOs have been a topic of discussion since the nineteenth century up until this thesis was conducted in 2023, evolving with the passage of different wars, encounters, sightings, and secret government investigations. Even though today we still have yet to definitely answer the question of whether or not we are alone in the universe, UFOs have continuously proven to be a significant source of commentary in popular, historical, and—particularly as this thesis demonstrates—journalistic culture.

Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker’s experience in Pascagoula on the night of October 11, 1973, sparked what would be one of the most famous extraterrestrial encounters to hit the newsstands. Their experience, while often deemed untrue at the time, has evolved into a discussion larger than the two of them would have ever imagined. Through analyzing the news media coverage of the Pascagoula alien abduction in 1973 and comparing it to modern digital coverage that acknowledges and legitimizes the possibility of other lifeforms living in the sky above us, this thesis addresses the topic of media evolution over the last fifty years.

When Hickson and Parker’s story dominated newspaper headlines in 1973, journalism served mainly as an outlet to share the news with the public. This can be seen in the extensive analysis of articles written about the Pascagoula alien abduction in 1973 found in this study. The job of the journalist was to relay the facts and tell the story with the most important information first. In Hickson and Parker’s case, this meant producing articles that fell into the shallow end of the pool, addressing only what happened, who it happened to, where it happened, and when it happened. These articles from 1973 entirely

missed what modern journalists would argue are the most important questions of all: what does this mean, and what are we going to do about it?

Journalists who cover UFOs today are much more inclined to legitimize UFOs and tackle the larger questions that were skipped over in the coverage from the Pascagoula alien abduction era. Instead of glazing over the uncomfortable questions of what UFOs mean to national security and our overall existence as human beings, media coverage today buries itself deep within those what-ifs, and in doing so, reaffirms the argument that modern journalistic practices create a much more open, analytical, and conversational forum to the public compared to past decades. This also, in turn, reinforces the argument that the articles we see today about UFOs are more complex in nature and are created by journalists who prioritize public interest and discussion over simply stating the facts.

The importance of this thesis, which delves into the intertwined relationships between the media, science, and ufology, is its comparison of archival and contemporary journalism. The purpose of this study is not to answer the question of whether or not UFOs exist, or if Hickson and Parker actually encountered extraterrestrial beings, but rather to understand the significance of how journalistic practices have changed to adapt to modern society. Specifically in regard to the discussion of UFOs, this change in journalism has fostered a more aware and engaged public, allowing for deeper and more analytical conversations about the unidentified and unknown.

REFERENCES

- Achenbach, Joel. "What we actually know about aliens, according to science." *The Washington Post*. November 25, 2023.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2023/11/25/aliens-uaps-scientific-evidence/>.
- "After hypnotizing victims, scientists believe UFO tale." *Hattiesburg American*. October 14, 1973.
- "Astronomer Says 'Craft' Landed." *Longview News Journal*. October 16, 1973.
- Bader, Chris D.. "The UFO Contact Movement from the 1950s to the Present." *Studies in Popular Culture* 17, no. 2 (1995): 73–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23413704>.
- Bell, Jimmie. "Everybody's Business." *The Daily Herald*. October 21, 1973.
- "Bizarre Tale Revealed: 'Green Men' Really Red?". *Austin American Statesman*. October 15, 1973.
- Blumenthal, Ralph and Kean, Leslie. "Do We Believe in U.F.O.s.? That's the Wrong Question." *The New York Times*. June 3, 2021.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/28/insider/UFO-reporting.html?searchResultPosition=25>.
- Chang, Kenneth. "NASA Introduces New U.F.O. Research Director." *The New York Times*. September 14, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/14/science/nasa-ufo-uap-report.html?searchResultPosition=2>.
- "Charles Hickson – Biography." IMDb. Accessed March 1, 2024.
<https://m.imdb.com/name/nm1495103/bio/>.

“Coast Men Claim They Were Forced Aboard UFO.” *Enterprise Journal*. October 12, 1973.

Cooper, Helene, Blumenthal, Ralph, and Kean, Leslie. “Glowing Auras and ‘Black Money’: The Pentagon’s Mysterious U.F.O. Program.” *The New York Times*. December 16, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/us/politics/pentagon-program-ufo-harry-reid.html>.

“Creatures from UFO examine two fishermen in Pascagoula.” *The Clarksdale Press Register*. October 12, 1973.

Cross, Anne. “The Flexibility of Scientific Rhetoric: A Case Study of UFO Researchers.” *Qualitative Sociology* 27, no. 1 (2004): 3-34.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/B:QUAS.0000015542.28438.41>.

“DoD Announces the Establishment of the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office.” U.S. Department of Defense. July 20, 2022.
<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3100053/dod-announces-the-establishment-of-the-all-domain-anomaly-resolution-office/>.

Eghigian, Greg. “Making UFOs make sense: Ufology, science, and the history of their mutual mistrust.” *Public Understanding of Science* 26, no. 5 (2017): 612-626.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662515617706>.

Emmerich, John. “Editor’s Notes.” *The Greenwood Commonwealth*. October 18, 1973.

“Establishment of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force.” U.S. Department of Defense. August 14, 2020.
<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2314065/establishment-of-unidentified-aerial-phenomena-task-force/>.

- “Federals enter UFO case.” *The Clarksdale Press Register*. October 13, 1973.
- Geppert, Alexander C.T.. “Extraterrestrial encounters: UFOs, science and the quest for transcendence, 1947-1972.” *History and Technology* 28, no. 3 (2012): 335-362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07341512.2012.723340>.
- Hayes, Matthew. “‘Then the Saucers Do Exist?’: UFOs, the Practice of Conspiracy, and the Case of Wilbert Smith.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 3 (2017): 665-696. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.2017-0028.r1>.
- Hickson, Charles. “An Oral History with Mr. Charles Hickson Native Mississippian.” Interview by Orley B. Caudill in 1979. Hattiesburg, MS: The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at Southern Miss.
- Hickson, Charles and Mendez, William. *UFO Contact at Pascagoula*. West Yorkshire, England: Flying Disk Press, 2017.
- Hoffman, Jason. “White House on UFO report earlier this month: ‘We take reports of incursions into our airspace... very seriously.’” CNN. June 25, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/pentagon-ufo-report/index.html>.
- Horstemeier, Robert P.. “Flying Saucers Are Real! The US Navy, Unidentified Flying Objects, and the National Security State.” *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 187-216. <https://sdonline.org/issue/42/flying-saucers-are-real-us-navy-unidentified-flying-objects-and-national-security-state>.
- Hutchison, Phillip J. and Strentz, Herbert J.. “Journalism Versus the Flying Saucers: Assessing the First Generation of UFO coverage 1947-1967.” *American Journalism* 36, no. 2 (2019): 150-170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2019.1602418>.

- Jacobs, David M.. "A Brief History of Abduction Research." *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 23, no. 1 (2009): 70.
<https://journalofscientificexploration.org/index.php/jse/article/view/106>.
- Kloor, Keith. "UFOs Won't Go Away." *Issues in Science and Technology* 35, no. 3 (2019): 50. <https://issues.org/ufos-wont-go-away/>.
- "Latest report: Columbia radar jammed by UFO." *Hattiesburg American*. October 15, 1973.
- Lewis-Kraus, Gideon. "How the Pentagon Started Taking U.F.O.s Seriously." *The New Yorker*. April 30, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/05/10/how-the-pentagon-started-taking-ufos-seriously>.
- Mathis, Joel. "What We Know from Decades of UFO Government Investigations." *National Geographic*. July 6, 2023.
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/ufo-alien-spacecraft-investigation-timeline/>.
- McNally, Richard J.. "Explaining 'Memories' of Space Alien Abduction and Past Lives: An Experimental Psychopathology Approach." *Journal of Experimental Psychopathology* 3, no. 1 (2012): 2-16. <https://doi.org/10.5127/jep.017811>.
- Parker, Calvin. *Pascagoula: The Closest Encounter*. West Yorkshire, England: Flying Disk Press, 2018.
- "Pascagoula fishermen 'see Martians, ride in UFO'." *The Greenwood Commonwealth*. October 12, 1973.
- Petrova, Magdalena. "U.S. government wants to move conversation around UFOs from speculation to science." *CNBC*. October 17, 2023.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2023/10/17/-us-changing-conversation-around-ufos-from-speculation-to-science.html>.

“Polygraph test verifies UFO story.” *The Daily Herald*. October 31, 1973.

“Preliminary Assessment: Unidentified Aerial Phenomena.” Office of the Director of National Intelligence. June 25, 2021.

<https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Preliminary-Assessment-UAP-20210625.pdf>.

“Protocol for UFOs.” *The Commercial Appeal*. October 16, 1973.

“Something happened! They were scared to death: Coastians relate trip inside creatures’ space ship.” *The Daily Herald*. October 12, 1973.

Sparks, Glenn G., Pellechia, Marianna, and Irvine, Chris. “Does television news about UFOs affect viewers’ UFO beliefs?: An experimental investigation.” *Communication Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1998): 284-294.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01463379809370102>.

Stelter, Brian. “Why UFOs Freak Out the Government.” *Vanity Fair*. November 16, 2023. <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/11/why-ufos-freak-out-the-government>.

“They really saw it says UFO researcher.” *The Greenwood Commonwealth*. October 15, 1973.

“Two Mississippi Men Recount Abduction by ‘Space Creatures’.” *Buffalo Evening News*. October 13, 1973.

“UFO Holds Two Men Captive.” *The Clarion-Ledger*. October 13, 1973.

“UFO Reports Swamp Mississippi.” *Corpus Christi Times*. October 16, 1973.

“UFOs ‘baffling’.” *Delta Democrat Times*. October 17, 1973

“Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Independent Study Team Report.” NASA.

September 14, 2023. <https://smd-cms.nasa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/uap-independent-study-team-final-report.pdf>.

Vida, István Kornél. “The ‘Great Moon Hoax’ of 1835.” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 18, no. 1/2 (2012): 431–41.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43488485>.

Von Rennenkampff, Marik. “10 Key questions for this week’s historic UFO hearing.”

The Hill. April 17, 2023. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3953558-10-key-questions-for-this-weeks-historic-ufo-hearing/>.

Westrum, Ron. “Social Intelligence about Anomalies: The Case of UFOs.” *Social Studies of Science* 7, no. 3 (1977): 271–302. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/284599>.