

Close Encounters with the Pentagon

Written by Robbie Graham and Matthew Alford

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For 60 years space aliens have left their mark on the Hollywood box-office in some of the most popular movies of all time, from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982) and *Independence Day* (1996), to the highly lucrative *Monsters vs. Aliens* (2009). Particularly noteworthy is the *Transformers* franchise (2007-), which to date has tapped the rich vein of UFO mythology to the tune of \$1.5 billion. The most interesting aspects of the *Transformers* films, however, are evident not so much in celluloid form as they are behind the scenes – in a production process built around the close relationship between Hollywood, the United States military and a variety of government agencies. While the dryer details of the “military-industrial-entertainment complex” have been relatively well documented, the curious tale of government involvement in Hollywood’s UFO movies represents a forgotten chapter in the history of American cinema.

Perception Management: Past and Present

Bizarrely – and for reasons not entirely clear – the U.S. government has taken a keen interest in Hollywood’s flying saucer movies since the early days of the phenomenon. Official efforts to debunk UFOs through media channels originated with the CIA-sponsored Robertson Panel which, in 1953, decided that public excitement about flying saucers should be actively discouraged. The panel recommended “That the national security agencies take immediate steps to strip the Unidentified Flying Objects of the... aura of mystery they have unfortunately acquired,” and that this should “be accomplished by mass media such as television [and] motion pictures...” with specific reference to Walt Disney. [i](#)

Unambiguous evidence for the Robertson Panel's covert impact on media representations of UFOs is found in the CBS TV broadcast of *UFOs: Friend, Foe, or Fantasy?* (1966), a documentary narrated by Walter Cronkite. In a personal letter addressed to former Robertson Panel Secretary Frederick C. Durant, Dr Thornton Page confides that he “helped organize the CBS TV show around the Robertson Panel conclusions,”

[ii](#)
even though this was thirteen years later and despite the fact that he was personally sympathetic to the existence of flying saucers.

Government concern over, or involvement in, UFO movies continues to be evidenced in more

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modern Hollywood productions. Take, for example, the 1996 alien invasion blockbuster *Independence Day*

, which, despite its proud championing of American values and leadership, was denied cooperation from the

Department of Defense (DoD)

due in large part to a plotline concerning Area 51 (a super-secret military facility in the Nevada desert long rumoured to be the testing ground for captured extraterrestrial technologies) and the so-called 'Roswell Incident.' The Pentagon specifically requested that "any government connection" to Area 51 or to Roswell be eliminated from the film – a request apparently based on the ridiculous assumption that both the Roswell Incident and Area 51 were not already known to half of America.

[iii](#)

The DoD may have been unable to dictate script changes on *Independence Day*, but its involvement with both

Transformers

movies (2007 and 2009) was much more deep-rooted. The original film's script is loaded with UFOlogical references and laboured rhetoric absolving the U.S. military of complicity in what turns out to be a massive cover-up of alien visitations. The finger is pointed instead at the quasi-governmental "Sector 7" which has been concealing its "Top Secret" alien research for decades within "special access projects" – and all without the knowledge and consent of a shocked and concerned Secretary of Defense.

The United States Air Force (USAF) provided *Transformers* director Michael Bay with hundreds-of-millions-of-dollars worth of state-of-the-art hardware for use in the 2007 movie, including the F-117 stealth fighter and – in its first ever Silver Screen appearance – the F-22 Raptor fighter. The DoD's support for the

Transformers

sequel (2009) was no less enthusiastic as Bay was granted every benefit of the Pentagon's coveted "full co-operation."

Managing the Martians

The government found an earlier blockbuster to be rather less welcome. Discussing his classic UFO movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), Steven Spielberg once revealed in an Australian film journal that he "found [his] faith [in alien life]" when he heard that the government opposed the film. "If NASA took the time to write me a 20-page letter, then I knew there must be something happening," Spielberg said. "When they read the script they got very angry and felt that it was a film that would be dangerous. I felt they mainly wrote the letter because Jaws convinced so many people around the world that there were sharks in toilets and bathtubs, not just in the oceans and rivers. They were afraid the same kind of epidemic would happen with

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UFOs.”

[iv](#)

Close Encounters raised a red flag to the powers that be, but it wasn't the first UFO movie to do so. During the late 1940s the U.S. government regarded the subject of flying saucers with considerable gravity – 1948 saw the USAF produce its Top Secret and highly controversial 'Estimate of the Situation,' an official report concluding flying saucers to be of extraterrestrial origin. [v](#) Other USAF factions at the time, however, favoured the more palatable (though no less alarming) idea that the saucers were a dastardly Soviet invention. With the prospect of both Reds and Martians under the bed, it should come as little surprise to learn that when America's very first UFO movie, *The Flying Saucer* (1950), went into production in 1949 it registered quickly on the USAF radar.

The film's director, Mikel Conrad, had claimed publicly whilst still in production that he had managed to secure genuine footage of a real flying saucer for use in his movie. In September 1949, Conrad told the *Ohio Journal Herald*, "I have scenes of the saucer landing, taking off, flying and doing tricks." Conrad further claimed that his remarkable footage was "locked in a bank vault" and would not be shown to anybody prior to his movie's release; shortly thereafter Conrad became the subject of a two month official Air Force investigation. Documents released under the Freedom of Information Act reveal that an agent of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations was dispatched not only to grill Conrad about his claims, but also to attend the first private screening of his completed movie.

Unsurprisingly, Conrad's fantastical claims proved to be without substance – when challenged by the USAF, he admitted that his saucer story was nothing more than an elaborate marketing scam designed to generate media buzz around what was, in reality, a tedious and uneventful movie. [vi](#) Nevertheless, what the Conrad case demonstrates, according to researcher Nick Redfern, "is that the Air Force at the time was taking a keen interest in fictional films about UFOs." Redfern, who has studied the original documentation on the Conrad Case, suggests that the USAF may have considered it "problematic that someone was making a film about UFOs that could have contained real footage." [vii](#) Redfern speculates that, from this point on, the USAF learned to be on the lookout for any other pesky UFO movies lurking on the horizon, and to carefully monitor – and even control – their content on grounds of national security.

The above scenario seems plausible in light of the production of a major UFOlogical documentary in 1956, entitled *U.F.O.*, which compelled the USAF to draw up contingency plans to counteract the anticipated fallout from the film upon its release. The director of the USAF's official UFO investigations unit, Project Blue Book, Captain George T. Gregory, was tasked with monitoring not only the film's production process, but its public and critical reception. Believing that the film would stir up a "storm of public controversy," the USAF had set about preparing a

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special case file that would debunk every saucer sighting examined in the movie and even went so far as to have three of its Blue Book officers provide “technical assistance” to the filmmakers in an effort to control the content of the documentary. [viii](#)

“A Hot Potato”

The USAF also made extensive script alterations to a seemingly innocent episode of the *Steve Canyon*

TV series (1958–1959). Backed by Chesterfield Cigarettes and produced at Universal Studios with the full cooperation of the United States Air Force, the NBC show chronicled the daring live-action exploits of Milton Caniff’s famous comic strip character. Each episode was bookended with the seal of The Department of the Air Force and with a voice-over announcing: “Steve Canyon! A Salute to the Air Force Men of America!”

The episode to which the USAF took objection was entitled “Project UFO” and saw Colonel Steve Canyon investigate a spate of flying saucer sightings reported to a local Air Force base. According to aviation historian James H. Farmer, “This was an episode that the Air Force did not really want to be aired.” In his commentary track for the Steve Canyon DVD (available at: <http://stevecanyondvd.blogspot.com/>), Farmer notes that the USAF was uncomfortable with the episode because UFOs were, at the time of the show’s production, “causing them a lot of public relations problems... from Roswell in ’47 to the UFO over-flights over Washington DC in ’52... the Air Force wanted nothing to do with it [the UFO issue],” said Farmer, “it was a hot potato that they were very happy to get rid of when Project Blue Book was discontinued in December of ’69.”

By the time the USAF had finished with the script, it was, in Farmer’s words, “pretty tame... compared to the earlier renditions.” Indeed, in the episode as eventually aired the UFO sightings are attributed to a combination of hoax-induced hysteria and – in support of the Air Force’s original Roswell cover story – misidentifications of weather balloons.

Producer John Ellis of the Milton Caniff Estate is likewise intrigued by the number of revisions to which the script was subjected: “The thing that’s interesting is that when you look at the original scripts... every single page got re-written, and re-written, and re-written...” [ix](#) David Haft, the show’s producer, was more to the point in his recollection of the Air Force’s reaction when he submitted the first script draft for official approval: ““Oh, oh, oh, oh! No, no, no, no!” Haft also noted that the USAF had difficulty in deciding what was acceptable for broadcast.

[x](#)

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A number of alterations to the “Project UFO” script are particularly revealing. In one of the earliest early drafts, for example, Steve Canyon speaks to his Commanding Officer, Colonel Jamison, in defence of a civilian UFO witness: “Why call him a jerk?” asks Canyon, “Seems to me like he acted like a pretty solid, clearheaded citizen...” This dialogue was removed. Elsewhere in the draft, Canyon appears to be enthusiastic about flying saucers. At one point, when a fresh UFO report comes into the base from the local town, Canyon, “Jumps to [his] feet, rushes to [the] door,” and cries “This I gotta see!” before making “a hurried exit.” Interestingly, in the final scene as originally written, Canyon is actually seen opening a book on flying saucers, “and sits there quietly reading...” Needless to say, this scene failed to make it to the final draft, and, in the version as aired, Canyon’s excitement about UFOs is replaced with scepticism or plain indifference. It is important to remind ourselves that such changes are neatly in line with the Robertson Panel’s recommendations to “strip the Unidentified Flying Objects of the... aura of mystery they have unfortunately acquired,” through, “mass media, such as television...”

Perhaps the most significant alteration to the “Project UFO” episode involved the removal of an entire plot strand concerning the recovery and scientific analysis of what is initially suspected to be flying saucer debris (but which eventually turns out to be nothing of the sort). The draft included dialogue like: “That *thing* [flying saucer] dropped a small metal ball enclosing an electrical apparatus so intricate, so ingenious, nobody yet has been able to figure out its purpose,” and, “the metal wouldn’t respond to any of the standard tests.” With such obvious shades of Roswell, it is unsurprising that the Air Force was concerned.

[xi](#)

Despite its content having been tamed to the point of banality, the USAF preferred that the episode not be aired at all. “It got stuck on a shelf,” says Ellis in his DVD commentary, “it was finished... but they held on until near the end of the series to air it.” In fact, it was only through a last act of defiance on the part of the show’s producers toward the end of its run in 1959 that the episode was screened at all.

That the Pentagon should have seen fit to involve itself in UFO-related entertainment in a debunking capacity makes sense in light of its repeated attempts over the decades to publicly wash its hands of the flying saucer problem. But this approach seems to be at odds with a number of instances dating back to the 1950s in which the U.S. military (possibly in conjunction with the CIA) has actually facilitated the production of UFO-related media content promoting not only the idea of UFO reality, but of extraterrestrial visitation.

Disney and the Aliens

Intriguing testimony along these lines came from Oscar-winning Disney animator Ward Kimball.

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Kimball was best known for bringing to life beloved Disney characters such as Jiminy Cricket, The Cheshire Cat and The Mad Hatter, and for redesigning Mickey Mouse in 1938. He also worked as Directing Animator on the Disney classics like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938), *Pinocchio* (1940), and *Fantasia* (1940).

In 1979, Kimball claimed that in the mid-1950s the USAF had approached Walt Disney himself to request his cooperation on a documentary about UFOs that would help acclimatise the American public to the reality of extraterrestrials. Even more intriguing was that, in exchange for his cooperation, the USAF would apparently supply Disney with real UFO footage for exclusive use in his documentary. According to Kimball, Disney accepted the deal and began work immediately on the USAF project, which would not have been unusual considering Disney's established relationship with the U.S. government (during WWII Disney made approximately 80 propaganda shorts for the military).

While Disney waited patiently for the USAF to provide the UFO footage, his animators produced conceptual designs of what an alien might look like. Predictably, the offer of the UFO footage was eventually withdrawn, provoking Kimball to challenge the official military liaison for the project, a USAF Colonel who told Kimball that "there was indeed plenty of UFO footage, but that neither [he], nor anyone else was going to get access to it." [xii](#) Needless to say, the project was abandoned and forgotten by all but the few who had worked on it.

The Glittering Robes of Entertainment

In connection with research she was conducting for a UFO documentary in 1983, Emmy award winning filmmaker and journalist Linda Moulton Howe was told by government sources that the 1951 version of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which depicted an alien landing in Washington D.C., was, in her words, "inspired by the CIA," and "one of the first government tests of public reaction to such an event." [xiii](#)

As farfetched as this may seem, the screenwriter for *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Edmund H. North, was actively serving as a Major in the Army Signal Corps just months before being selected by 20th Century Fox to pen the script. During his time in the Corps, North had been in charge of "training and educational" documentaries, and later established himself as a Hollywood scribe of patriotic war films including

Sink the Bismark!

(1960) and

Submarine X-1

(1968), as well as

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Patton

(1970), for which he received an Oscar – all of which raises the possibility that he maintained an official or quasi-official role in the government's cinematic propaganda campaigns throughout his career.

The man responsible for overseeing the production of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* – 20th Century Fox production chief Darryl Zanuck – was himself in charge of an Army Signal Corps documentary unit during the Second World War

[xiv](#)

and said that, “If you have something worth while to say, dress it up in the glittering robes of entertainment and you will find a ready market... without entertainment, no propaganda film is worth a dime.”

[xv](#)

Disclosure through Documentary?

In 1972, filmmaker Robert Emenegger – formerly Vice President and Creative Director at Grey Advertising – and his producing partner Allan Sandler were encouraged by the USAF to make a major documentary feature about the UFO phenomenon. Emenegger told us that Sandler, “had very strange connections” for a producer and thought that he “did things for the CIA, and maybe even the FBI... they all seemed to work together.” Indeed, Emenegger himself was ideally suited to an assignment of this nature: as a student at UCLA in the mid-1950s, his thesis examined “The Influence of Motion Pictures on Public Behavior,” with the young Emenegger being especially interested in cinema “as an instrument of propaganda.” Additionally, Emenegger had spent a number of years working for the United States Information Agency (USIA) (a politically correct name given to the government's long-running propaganda agency). During his time with the USIA, Emenegger developed a close professional relationship with its then Deputy Director of Motion Picture and Television, Bruce Herschensohn. [xvi](#)

In 1972 – while Emenegger and Sandler were gearing up for the production of their USAF UFO documentary – Herschensohn left the USIA to serve full-time at the White House as an assistant to President Nixon. Significantly, Emenegger had also performed duties for Nixon. In December 1968, the then President-elect wrote to Emenegger seeking his “active participation and assistance” in finding “exceptional individuals” worthy of appointment in his incoming administration. Nixon referred to Emenegger as, “a leader” and, “in a position to know and recommend... the best minds in America.” [xvii](#)

Emenegger described to the authors how he was briefed on the UFO project at Norton Air Force Base in “a clean room used by the CIA... so there was no way anyone could eavesdrop

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on us.” In an offer similar to that made some twenty years earlier to Walt Disney, the USAF promised Emenegger real UFO footage – this time allegedly showing a UFO landing at Holloman Air Force Base in 1971 and the subsequent face-to-face meeting between alien visitors and delegates of the U.S. government. Emenegger was sceptical, but was assured by the USAF that the footage existed, and was genuine.

Whilst he waited for the footage to materialise, Emenegger and his crew continued with their wider production research for which they were given unprecedented access to DoD facilities, including the Pentagon. Emenegger was even granted time with high-ranking military officers apparently well-versed in UFO-related matters, among them Colonel William Coleman, a former spokesman for Project Blue Book, and Colonel George Weinbrenner, then head of Foreign Technology at Wright Patterson Air Force Base – the location where alien materials and bodies allegedly recovered from the 1947 Roswell crash are said to have been stored.

But who in the Air Force would sign off on such a controversial project? Emenegger put this question to Pentagon spokesman Colonel Coleman, who informed him that “the Secretary of the Air Force gave us the order to cooperate.” Thus, in an unprecedented move, the Air Force, Army, and Navy gave their full backing to a UFO-related production, so too did NASA, who provided Emenegger’s research team with previously unreleased photographs of what appeared to be UFOs in space taken by Gemini astronauts. “We had carte blanche to go anywhere, ask any questions,” Emenegger told us, “there were no restrictions put on us.” Emenegger even claims to have been shown “Top Secret” footage shot at Vandenberg Air Force Base which showed two UFOs “playfully running behind” a U.S. missile.

After months of shooting, Emenegger’s documentary was complete, save for one crucial ingredient – the much-hyped alien landing footage. At the eleventh hour the USAF withdrew its permission for use of the material; the political climate had changed, it said, and was now deemed inappropriate due to the Watergate scandal which had recently broken. “I felt like we had egg on our face,” Emenegger told us, “I felt cheated that we were not allowed to see this film. It was taken back to the Pentagon... I stupidly expected to have this footage, which would have been earth-shattering.” 36 years on and Emenegger seems as baffled by the whole affair as anyone: “Were we had? Were we being used?” he asks. [xviii](#)

Emenegger’s Golden Globe nominated documentary, entitled *UFOs: Past, Present and Future*, was finally released in 1974 and was ground-breaking in its extensive use of information provided by the DoD. In addition to the aforementioned photographs from NASA, it featured sit-down interviews with the former heads of Project Blue Book, and footage shot inside the Pentagon of Colonel Coleman talking open-mindedly about the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis. In

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the absence of the landing footage, Emenegger was forced to include an animated reconstruction of the event as described to him by the USAF, complete with artistic renderings of the alleged aliens. The documentary presented the incident as “one that might happen in the future – or perhaps could have happened already.”

It should be noted, however, that the landing footage wasn't entirely absent – at least not according to Emenegger. During the dramatic reconstruction of the alleged landing, the observant viewer can catch a few frames of what appears to be a genuine, self-luminescent Unidentified Flying Object descending slowly in the distance against the backdrop of Holloman's surrounding landscape. These frames, Emenegger claims, were taken from the original landing footage and authorised by the USAF during the editing stage for use his completed documentary.

Interestingly, echoes of Emenegger's deal with the Department of Defense would resound decades later in the production of the aforementioned *Transformers* (2007) when director Michael Bay was granted the rare privilege of shooting scenes of his alien movie at the Pentagon. The DoD even threw open the gates to Holloman Air Force Base – the highly sensitive location of the alleged alien landing described to Emenegger (and it would do so again for the *Transformers* sequel). To this day, the only two Hollywood filmmakers to have been granted access to Holloman are Emenegger and Bay – both of whose films dealt with the subject of alien visitation – and this in flat contradiction to the DoD's policy as stated to other filmmakers that it will not work with UFO-related productions because “UFOs do not exist.”

Colonel Coleman Returns

The plot thickened in 1978 when Colonel William Coleman – who had acted as the USAF's official liaison for Robert Emenegger's documentary – produced an NBC drama series called *Project UFO*

(1978-79) (not to be confused with the

Steve Canyon

episode of the same name), a sort of '70s equivalent of the

X-Files

, but which, oddly enough, simultaneously seemed to promote and debunk the idea of UFO reality in each episode. It is unusual to say the least for a commercial television series to be produced by a high ranking military officer, but that this was the very same officer who had promised UFO landing footage for use in a government-approved documentary just a few years prior, coupled with the fact that the series was entirely based upon official Project Blue Book reports, suggests that a political agenda was being pursued.

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What on *Earth*...?

By now, many a sane reader will probably be puzzled, seeking an answer to the first rational question that comes to mind: “what on earth is going on here?” Why has the government’s concern about flying saucers been so far reaching that it has actually seen fit to manage public perception of UFOs by attempting to influence the content of major films, as appears to be the case?

Lieutenant Colonel Phillip J. Corso, who served on the National Security Council during the Eisenhower Administration and who was formerly chief of the Pentagon’s Foreign Technology desk, claimed that the production of flying saucer movies was actively encouraged by government-led UFO study groups during the 1950s. The goal, claimed Corso, was simultaneously to fictionalise UFOs (through their association with Hollywood entertainment) and to actualise them in the mind of the viewer, thereby acclimatising the public to UFO reality and politically manipulating their perceptions of the phenomenon in the process. Corso referred to this strategy as “camouflage through limited disclosure.” “We never hid the truth from anybody,” he said, “we just camouflaged it. It was always there [in documents, books, TV shows and movies], people just didn’t know what to look for or recognise it for what it was when they found it. And they found it over and over again.” [xix](#)

Although the CIA Robertson Panel appears to have exerted a sustained impact on media representations of UFOs, at least in the ‘50s and ‘60s, this does not constitute concrete proof of a longer-term, conscious and coherent government conspiracy along these lines. However, unless we assume that numerous individuals highly respected in their professions are either lying or deluded, it is difficult to explain the DoD’s apparent “smoke and mirrors” media tactics with regard to the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

Perhaps – as some believe – the government has made a number of attempts to acclimatise the public to the notion of alien visitation. Or perhaps efforts like those involving Emenegger and Kimball are part of a smokescreen for more mundane, though no less secretive, government projects. UFO movies may even be a facet of a U.S. psychological warfare programme. As farfetched as this may sound, CIA records show that as early as 1952 the Agency’s then Director Walter Bedell Smith was sufficiently concerned about UFOs to seriously discuss, “the possible offensive or defensive utilisation of these phenomena for psychological warfare purposes.” [xx](#)

Government/military involvement in UFO movies continues to this day. The 20th Century Fox remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) had Pentagon involvement in the form of official DoD Hollywood liaison Phil Strub and a number of high-ranking military officers whose names

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can be found at the tail end of the film's closing credits. Also featured is a special thank you from the film's producers to "the men and women of the United States military for their production assistance." Similarly, Disney's UFO-themed *Race to Witch Mountain* (2009) received assistance not only from the military but from the CIA [xxi](#) – a curious arrangement since the latter is not even represented on screen; what's more, the film's portrayal of the military is decidedly negative. In accordance with the media policies of both DoD and CIA, these facts would tend to disqualify a film from receiving production assistance from either party. In this case, however, both were only too willing to lend a helping hand, as Andy Fickman, the film's director, told *Premiere Magazine*: "the military advisors and intelligence advisors constantly helped to keep us honest every step of the way."

[xxii](#)

Conclusions

To paraphrase *The X-Files*' agent Mulder: we may "want to believe" the U.S. government when it says it no longer takes an active interest in UFOs. Certainly we all "want to believe" that Hollywood entertainment is just that – entertainment, rather than disinformation.

Judging by the examples outlined in this article, official policy regarding media representations of UFO phenomena seems to have shifted from project to project, from decade to decade, between concerted debunking efforts at one end of the spectrum and, at the other, more subversive attempts to quietly monitor and even seed the content of UFO-related media for purposes of psychological warfare and/or perception management. If nothing else, this should provide the incentive for us to sit up and pay greater attention to the fleets of flying saucer movies that will undoubtedly continue to land in our multiplexes.

Robbie Graham is a doctoral candidate at the University of Bristol. **Matthew Alford, Ph.D** is author of the forthcoming book: *"The Military-Industrial Dream Factory: How and Why Hollywood Supports U.S. Foreign Policy"* (Pluto Press, 2010). The authors have written about the politics of Hollywood for a variety of publications, including *The Guardian* and *New Statesman*.

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- iv Heathwood, Gail, 'Steven Spielberg', *Cinema Papers*, April – June, 1978. Our requests to NASA and to Spielberg for a copy of the 20 page letter have been unsuccessful. Spielberg's publicist Marvin Levy assured the authors on two separate occasions that he would pursue Spielberg on the matter but has since become unresponsive.
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- x Haft recalled his experiences of working on *Steve Canyon* during an interview conducted by John Ellis, August 17, 2006.
- xi Early script draft by Sidney Carroll dated June 27, 1958, supplied by John Ellis to Robbie Graham and Matthew Alford, May 27, 2009, courtesy of the Milton Caniff Estate.
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