Then-Arizona Gov. Fife Symington jokes with aide Jay Heiler, right, on June 19, 1997, after Symington had introduced his costumed aide as being a captured alien and then unmasking him. Scott Troyanos, Associated Press

By Deseret News

PHOENIX (AP) — Former Arizona Gov. Fife Symington trotted out an aide dressed as an alien 10 years ago to spoof the frenzy surrounding mysterious lights in the Phoenix sky. Now he says he saw the lights himself and believed from the start that they were extraterrestrial.

Now a pastry chef and business consultant, Symington said he didn't acknowledge his own encounter at first because he didn't want people to panic. The former governor, who faced fraud charges at the time, also said he didn't need the additional problems such an admission would have created.

Symington discussed the sighting with a UFO investigator making a documentary, and in media interviews this week.

"I'm a pilot, and I know just about every machine that flies," Symington, a former Air Force captain, told the Arizona Daily Star on Thursday. "It was bigger than anything that I've ever seen. It remains a great mystery. Other people saw it, responsible people. I don't know why people would ridicule it."

Symington told CNN the craft he saw March 13, 1997, was "enormous. It just felt otherworldly. In your gut, you could just tell it was otherworldly."

Symington said he initially told no one but his wife that he had seen the lights.

During a news conference that June, Symington, in his second term as governor, told reporters that an alien had been captured. He then ushered out his chief of staff, Jay Heiler, dressed in a costume complete with oversized head and eyes.

"This just goes to show that you guys are entirely too serious," Symington said then.

Later in 1997, Symington was convicted of bank fraud charges stemming from his bankrupt real estate empire. The conviction later was overturned and he was pardoned by President Clinton in 2001 before federal prosecutors decided whether they would retry the case.

Heiler, who says Symington is one of his closest friends, said he isn't surprised he believes in UFOs. He described his former boss as a "Trekkie" who believes earthlings will travel to distant solar systems at above the speed of light "in our lifetimes."

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The Phoenix lights, which appeared in a V shape as they moved across the sky, were widely explained as flares dumped by a military training flight, though many still doubted the government was telling all it knew.

Tucson astronomer and retired Air Force pilot James McGaha said he investigated two sightings over Phoenix that March night and traced both to A-10 aircraft flying in formation at high altitude.

"It was clearly aircraft in formation, flying at two different times and then dropping flares and it's clear to any rational person that's what it was," McGaha said.

McGaha said Symington "is not a trained observer and what he feels in his gut doesn't make any difference."

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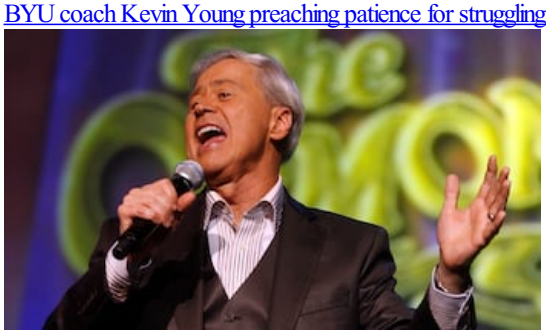
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