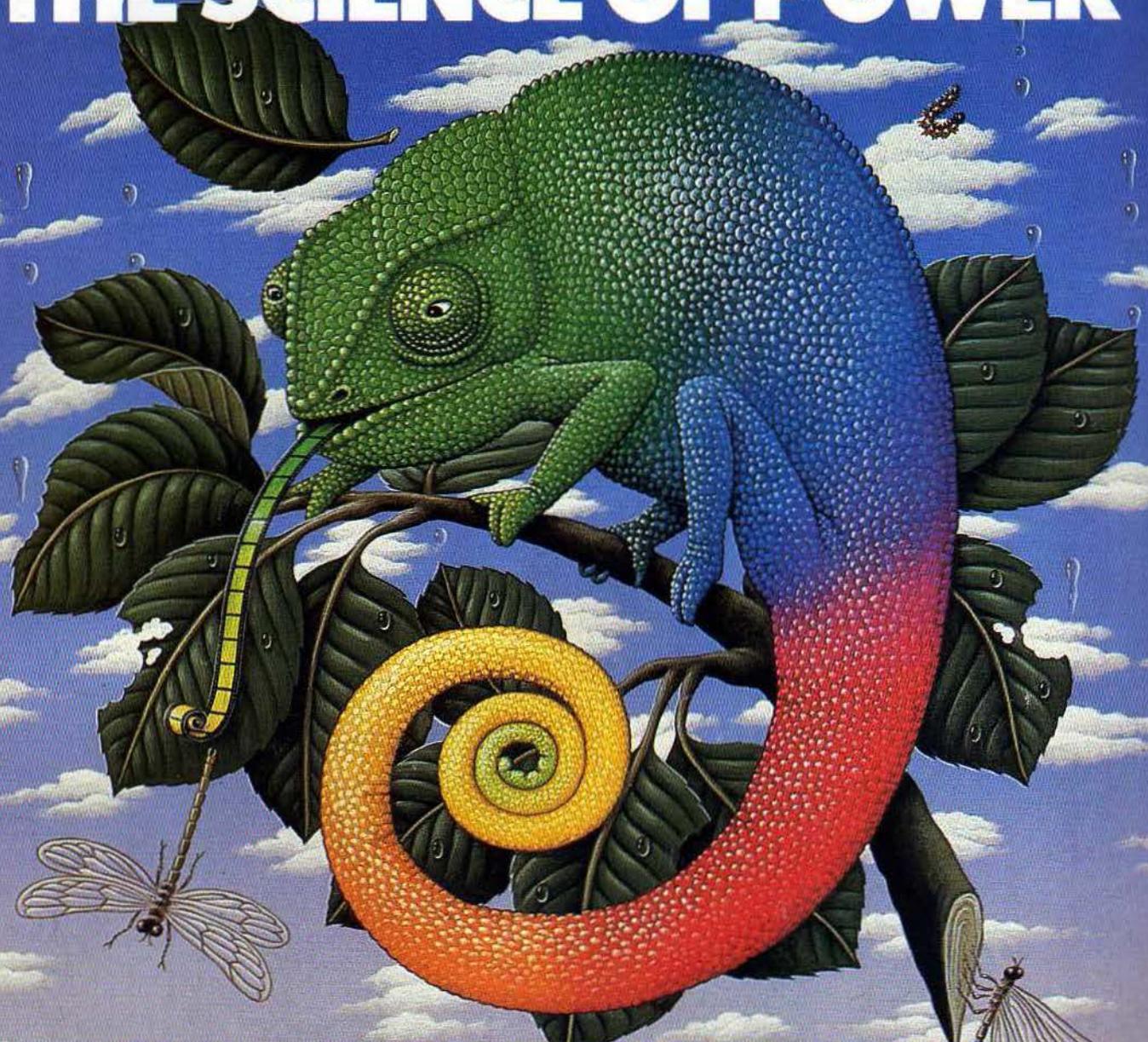


OMNI

JULY 1985 \$2.50

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“Something other
than bombs may be producing
rapidly expanding,
mushroom-shaped clouds.”

ANTI MATTER

It was close to midnight on April 9, 1984, when Captain Charles McDade, of Japan Air Lines flight 036, saw the mushroom. According to McDade, his commercial 747 was cruising some 250 miles northeast of Tokyo when a layer of cloud began to rise. In two minutes it had blossomed into an enormous mushroom 60,000 feet high and 200 miles wide. McDade radioed a Mayday alert to Anchorage, Alaska, and ordered his crew to use oxygen masks as a precaution. Later he stated that he had “never seen anything like it except in newsreels and films.”



UFO UPDATE

But McDade was not alone. Other pilots from Japan Air Lines, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, and Flying Tigers saw the cloud as well. Speculating that the mushroom might have resulted from the explosion of a nuclear-powered submarine, the Japanese Air Force sent an F-4 Phantom fighter-bomber to the scene to collect dust; but according to officials, no trace of radioactivity was found.

Soon the Federal Aviation Authority had dismissed the sighting as a lenticular, or lens-shaped, cloud (see “Phantom Mushroom,” *Antimatter*, October 1984). And that’s when Daniel A. Walker, a seismologist at the University of Hawaii, stepped onto the scene. Walker knew that the mushroom had risen too fast to be a lenticular cloud. And as director of an array of hydrophones in the western Pacific, he thought he might be able to come up with his own solution.

Walker’s hydrophones constantly scan the seas, and they are sensitive enough to detect and record the blast of a quarter pound of dynamite thousands of miles away. So he

decided to search his records for traces of the unusual or bizarre. Soon he’d uncovered a swarm of sharp, sudden pulses peaking in intensity on April 8 and 9. This was the clear signature of an undersea volcano, and Walker ultimately traced it to the eruption of Kaitoku Seamount, some 900 miles south of the cloud. Meteorologists analyzing the data then said that the jet stream could have blown the volcano dust north at high speed, accounting for the cloud reported by McDade. But when Walker checked satellite records, he discovered that winds

recorded on the eighth and ninth were relatively weak and that they hadn’t been moving toward the north at all.

Walker’s results, published in the February 8 issue of *Science* magazine, soon elicited some other theories. The cloud might have resulted from a weather-modification experiment, researchers suggested, or it might have been caused by the explosion of a tanker carrying liquefied natural gas.

Walker and colleagues have begun building a database to help them study the cloud. For as Walker points out, “The explanation is important. If these ideas don’t work, we’re back to some really scary possibilities. If the cloud was caused by a man-made atmospheric explosion, then who did it? And what kind of device have they employed?” If it was caused by some unknown natural phenomenon, on the other hand, “it’s important for us to know that something other than bombs can produce rapidly expanding, mushroom-shaped clouds. What if it were to happen again, over Washington, DC?”—T. A. HEPPENHEIMER