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COSMIC CONSPIRACY:

SIX DECADES

OF GOVERNMENT
UFO COVER-UPS

PART TWO

Shortly before midnight of July 19, 1952, air-traffic controllers at Washington National Airport picked up a group of unidentified flying objects on their radar screens. Over the next three and a half hours, the targets would disappear and reappear on their scopes. They were visually corroborated by incoming flight crews. At 3:00 in the morning, the Air Defense Command dispatched two F-94 jet interceptors, which failed to make contact with the targets.

The following weekend, the same scenario virtually repeated itself. Unknown targets were picked up on radar and verified both by incoming pilots and ground observers. This time, the hurriedly scrambled jets did manage to make visual contact and establish a brief radar lock-on, and the general public joined in the hoopla as well. According to *The UFO Controversy in America*, by Temple University historian David Jacobs, "So many calls

Editor's note: This is the second of a six-part series investigating UFOs and government secrecy through the years. The decade under scrutiny here is the 1950s.

ILLUSTRATION BY SHIGERU NOKURA

came into the Pentagon alone that its telephone circuits were completely tied up with UFO inquiries for the next few days." In several major newspapers, the 1952 UFO flap even bumped the Democratic National Convention off the front-page headlines.

The so-called "Washington Wave" also resulted in at least two events that have been debated ever since. On July 29, in an attempt to quell public concern, the military held its largest press conference since the end of WWII. Press conference heads Maj. Gen. John Samford, director of Air Force Intelligence, and Maj. Gen. Roger Ramo, chief of the Air Defense Command, denied that any interceptors had been scrambled and attributed the radar returns to temperature inversions.

In addition, the Washington sightings led directly to the CIA-sponsored Robertson Panel, so named after its chairman Dr. Harold P. Robertson, director of the Weapons Systems Evaluation Group for the secretary of defense. The Panel's basic mandate was outlined in a document later retrieved under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

In that crucial document, a 1952 memorandum to the National Security Council (NSC), CIA director Walter Bedell Smith wrote that "a broader, coordinated effort should be initiated to develop a firm scientific understanding of the several phenomena which are apparently involved in these reports, and to assure ourselves that [they] will not hamper our present efforts in the Cold War or confuse our early warning system in case of an attack."

In line with this mandate, the panel that finally convened in Washington, DC, in mid January of 1953 consisted of some of the best scientific minds of the day. Members included a future Nobel Prize laureate in physics, Luis Alvarez, formerly of Berkeley; physicist Samuel Goudsmit of the Brookhaven National Laboratories; and astronomer Thornton Page of Johns Hopkins University, later with NASA.

Yet for all of its scientific expertise, the Panel's major recommendations fell mainly in the domain of public policy. After a review of the evidence, the Panel concluded that while UFOs themselves did not necessarily "constitute a direct threat to the national security . . . the continued emphasis on the reporting of these phenomena does [threaten] the orderly functioning of the protective organs of the body politic."

Panel members recommended that "national-security agencies take steps immediately to strip the UFO phenomenon of its special status and eliminate the aura of mystery it has acquired." Perhaps a public-education program with the dual goals of "training and debunking" could be implemented? In this context, the Panel suggested that the mass media might be brought to bear on the problem, up to and including Walt Disney Productions!

More interestingly, the Panel also recommended that pro-UFO grassroots organizations be actively monitored "because of their potentially great influence on mass thinking if widespread sightings should occur." Mentioned by name were two organizations that had arisen in the wake of the Washington Wave: Civilian Saucer Intelligence of Los Angeles and the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, both now defunct.

Is there evidence that such surveil-

that apparently there is or was an Air Force Project Aquarius that dealt with UFOs," Goudie states. "Their own Project Aquarius, they said, did not, but they refused to say what it did deal with. They did admit it was classified top secret and that the release of any documents would damage the national security. The Air Force denies the existence of their own Project Aquarius, and the NSA now says it was mistaken. They ought to get their stories straight."

"It's almost impossible to confirm that any individual action was directly dictated by the Robertson Panel," agrees physicist and UFOlogist Stanton Friedman, co-author of *Crash at Corona*, "but was the subject defused at every available opportunity per its recommendations? You bet!"

Friedman points specifically to a press release issued on October 25, 1955, by the Department of Defense, chaired by secretary of the Air Force Donald Quarles. The occasion was the release of Special Report 14, issued by

Project Blue Book, the Air Force agency publicly charged with investigating UFOs. Quarles said there was no reason to believe that any UFO had ever overflowed the United States and that the 3 percent of unknowns reported the previous year could probably be identified with more information.

As Friedman sees it, however, Special Report 14 was the best UFO study

ever conducted. Interpreting the report for *Omni*, Friedman says it showed that "over 20 percent of all UFO sightings investigated between 1947 and 1952 were unknowns, and the better the quality of the sighting, the more likely it was to be an unknown. The press release failed to mention any of the 240 charts and tables in the original study," adds Friedman, "nor did it point out that the work had been done by the highly respected Battelle Memorial Institute under contract to the Department of Air Force. It's a classic case," Friedman says, "of the government having two hands and the left one not knowing what the right one is up to."

Whatever the truth about UFOs, however, the government tried mightily to conceal information suggesting mysterious origins afoot. For a population already shaky over nuclear arsenals, cold war, and communists under every bush, officials may have reckoned that the notion of visitors from beyond, even imaginary ones, might just have been too much to bear. ☐

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lance was conducted or that the Robertson Panel recommendations influenced government policies? "The paper trail is sketchy at best," says Dale Goudie, a Seattle advertising agent and information director for the Computerized UFO Network, or CUFON, an electronic bulletin board specializing in UFO documents retrieved under the FOIA. "What we know is that some agencies tend to keep some old UFO files while throwing out or mysteriously losing others. For example, we know the FBI kept a file on George Adamski, a famous UFO 'contactee' of the Fifties, perhaps because they thought he was a communist, and that the CIA had communicated with Maj. Donald Keyhoe, later one of the directors of the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena.

"When it comes to their own programs, however, the agencies are a bit more absent-minded." An example, says Goudie, is Project Aquarius. "The National Security Agency [NSA] admitted in a letter to Senator John Glenn