

American development of nuclear propulsion for aircraft and guided missiles.

It was Gasser's private, confidential opinion that the "man-made" devices were Soviet nuclear-propelled missiles. Gasser apparently misunderstood Project Sign's use of the adjective "man-made," taking it to imply earthly origin when it really meant "artificial" and extraterrestrial.

Gasser claimed that it had been known since about 1944 or 1945 that the Soviets were experimenting with a "flying disc." CIA reports from agents in southern Europe and southern Asia alleged that the U.S.S.R. was testing a long-range, remotely-piloted aircraft or missile. Since the Soviets were developing nuclear energy, Gasser thought they might possibly have the capability to build reactors for use in aircraft propulsion.

As further "evidence" of Soviet origin, Gasser noted that, according to reports he had received, the "missiles" usually approached the United States from the north, cruised around, then headed back north over the pole. This thesis about the north-south paths was a distorted version of an idea proposed by Lincoln La Paz.

The FBI special agent in charge of the Knoxville office, C. C. McSwain, sent a lengthy report of Gasser's remarks to headquarters on January 10. Two weeks later D. Milton Ladd, assistant director for security, summarized them for J. Edgar Hoover.

On March 25, after the Air Force Office of Intelligence (AFIOI) had requested the FBI to forward any UFO reports it got, Hoover instructed his field office heads to comply, adding melodramatically that a "reliable and confidential source" (Gasser) had informed the Bureau that flying discs were Soviet vehicles—a frightening conclusion to draw at a time when Soviet belligerence was at a high, the Berlin airlift was in full swing and the Nationalist Chinese were retreating from the onslaught of Communist forces.

Similar rumors about Soviet devices were circulating throughout the Southwest. At the weekly Wednesday intelligence conferences of the 4th Army, AFCSI, Office of Naval Intelligence, and FBI in San Antonio, the numerous sightings of unexplained phenomena around Albuquerque and Los Alamos figured prominently in the discussions. In the excitement the intelligence men in San Antonio were unearthing every conceivable item of information, all of it considered Top

Secret by the alarmed Army and Air Force representatives. Later, when the panic had subsided a bit, the classification was revised to Secret.

The group talked about the 1946 Swedish ghost rockets which, it decided, "might have originated in Russia." It also heard a distorted version of La Paz's ideas. The New Mexico objects were said to travel on an east-west line "with the probability that they approach from the northern quadrant [whatever that means] which would be the last stage of the great circle route if they originated in Russia." This was dead wrong. Such a great-circle path would start in the south Indian Ocean nowhere near the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, in New Mexico, security officials had been trying to handle the cases as routinely as possible so as not to give vent to a perhaps understandable impulse to panic. Very few cases came in during January—until the 30th, that is. Then all hell broke loose.

*"Hundreds of people
ail over New Mexico,
west Texas and
southern Colorado
sighted a green
fireball...the
most spectacular."*

At 5:54 p.m. that Sunday afternoon hundreds of people all over New Mexico, west Texas and southern Colorado sighted a green fireball. It was far and away the most spectacular such incident reported then or for years thereafter.

Government officials moved fast. Dr. La Paz helped organize teams to interview witnesses and to use surveyor's instruments for precise reenactments. La Paz had many times been able to track the impact points of meteorites, even locating them on the ground. If there was a chance that the object, meteorite or not, could be found by these methods, the scientist did not want to pass it by.

In a priority classified message Kirtland's commanding officer, Col. Harold Gunn, told AFCSI Headquarters that he had begun an "all out investigation" in hopes of locating the strange fireball's impact point "if any." The AEC, Armed Forces Special Weapons Project (AFSWP, the military unit in charge of all American nuclear weapons), the Fourth Army and local commanders all were "perturbed by the implications" of the phenomenon, he stressed.

After interviewing dozens of persons over hundreds of miles, La Paz managed to get a rough triangulation and AFCSI agents and other military personnel spread out to try to recover fragments. A Roswell, New Mexico, AFCSI investigator who thought he had seen the object disintegrate near him provided a burn lead which wasted many hours in fruitless searching. Finally, when La Paz had gotten more reports and better fixes, the searchers moved into the area around Lamesa, Texas.

After days of mud-drenched searches and bone-rattling rides in jeeps, the investigators gave up. La Paz was thoroughly baffled. When meteorites fell, he could usually locate fragments with an adequate search party and good observations to guide him. Here he had practically the state of New Mexico and the United States government at his disposal, plus superb observations—and there was nothing.

La Paz plotted an incredible 143-mile-long path from Amarillo to Lamesa; this time it was a north-south track. The green fireball had followed a very nearly horizontal path, starting at about 60,000 feet altitude and ending at about 40,000 feet. The speed was estimated at between 25,000 and 50,000 mph. At that hypersonic speed and low altitude there should have been a tremendous sonic boom. Yet there was no sound at all.

What did it mean? La Paz suggested a possible answer to AFCSI agent Paul Ryan when the two talked in Roswell on February 6. Maybe the green fireballs were controlled missiles traveling around the earth at high speed. That would explain their nearly level trajectory at such low altitudes. Such a missile could be brought down to a designated target area and exploded by radio-equipped agents, La Paz suggested. Perhaps the Soviet Union or some other country was practicing with these weapons using only dummy warheads which could later be replaced with nuclear