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warheads. The AFCSI later reported La Paz's words to the El Paso, Texas, FBI office.

The next day Dr. Joseph Kaplan, an expert geophysicist at UCLA and a member of the Air Force Scientific Advisory Board (AFSAB), lectured on the upper atmosphere at the University of New Mexico, probably at the request of La Paz, an old friend. Afterwards they met and La Paz detailed the recent green-fireball sightings. Kaplan was impressed and disturbed, all the more so when he further discussed the situation with Capt. Neef of AFCSI and Maj. William Godsoe, Fourth Army Intelligence liaison officer at the Sandia Base, both of whom were at the lecture.

Before he left, Kaplan said he believed the "probability of unimportance is vanishing." (In normal English that means, "The phenomenon is probably pretty important.") He promised to tell Dr. Theodore von Karman, world-renowned aerodynamicist and AFSAB chairman, that the green fireballs should be investigated in the name of national defense.

Worried nuclear agencies in New Mexico called a "Conference on Aerial Phenomena" at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory the afternoon of February 16. La Paz was there and so were representatives of AFCSI, AESS, AFSWP and the Fourth Army. A half-dozen lab officials, including Norris E. Bradbury and weapons-development director Edward Teller, also attended.

One agency not represented at the meeting, though it had promised to be there, was Project Sign. It no longer existed, at least by that name. On December 16 the new Air Force Director of Research and Development, Brig. Gen. Donald Putt, who had come over from the Air Materiel Command (AMC) engineering division and replaced Gen. Craigie in September 1948, decided to give

Sign only one more year of operation as a special high-priority project. And he wanted the name changed.

This abrupt change in attitude toward Sign and UFOs presaged an organizational shake-up and transfer of most of Sign's extraterrestrial advocates to other jobs at AMC. After scientists at the RAND Project and on the Air Force Scientific Advisory Board (AFSAB) had failed to back the outer-space conclusion, the AMC people had grown discouraged about the prospects of getting scientific substantiation for the Top Secret "Estimate of the Situation."

Project Sign was established in the AMC's T-2 division on January 22, 1948. Its personnel became convinced early on that UFOs were extraterrestrial vehicles, a conviction reinforced by a spectacular early-morning encounter over Alabama the following July 24, when two Eastern Airlines pilots reported seeing a large object with the fuselage of a B-29 and two rows of lighted "windows," with a 50-foot trail of orange-red flame streaming from the back. A maintenance crew chief at Robins AFB, Georgia, independently witnessed the event.

Impressed because this seemed to be the first reliable double-confirmation case, Sign prepared a thick Top Secret "Estimate of the Situation: Flying Discs" addressed to the Chief of Staff and detailing the project's astounding conclusions. The term "estimate of the situation" has nothing to do with intelligence, contrary to the mythology promoted in some UFO books. It is simply a term military commanders use to label their reports of battlefield situations—combat jargon, in other words. The AMC's flying-disc project fancied itself in command of a new battleground: space.

This explosive report passed through channels until it reached Chief of Staff Hoyt S. Vandenberg, who promptly defused it by rejecting its findings.

With the personnel turnover, the name of Sign was changed to Project Grudge on February 11, 1949, and the project adopted a policy of hostility toward UFOs, in accord with the new chill in Washington. (Later the personnel changeover was the excuse given for Grudge's not attending the Los Alamos conference.) Edward J. Ruppelt, who eventually headed Grudge, changed the name again because, as he would write in his *Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (1956), "too

many people were guessing correctly what it meant."

Ruppelt remarked that after studying the UFO files he was so struck with the dramatic policy reversal that he, like so many others, wondered if there was a hidden reason for it. "Was it actually an attempt to go underground, to make the project more secretive?" he asked himself. "Was it an effort to hide the fact that UFOs were proven to be interplanetary and that this should be withheld from the public to prevent a mass panic?"

At the Los Alamos conference the participants were discussing the official attitudes. Major Godsoe said that except for the Air Force, "Most of the military [Army] authorities think we are crackpots." "We aren't laughing," responded Navy Cdr. Richard Mandelkorn of the AFSWP Research and Development Division at Sandia Base.

But the scientists needed heavy persuasion. La Paz detailed his arguments against meteors, adding that Kaplan had assured him that the fireballs were not part of some official "classified training exercise." La Paz noted that most observers had described a pale-green or yellow-green color rather than the meteoric blue-green. Such colors had never been reported with meteors, so far as La Paz could determine. A witness to one sighting himself, he said the color was rather like the flame spectra of copper.

One obvious objection to the meteor theory was that the fireballs had appeared in a sudden concentration and had been confined mostly to the Southwest. Good weather conditions in the Southwest couldn't explain it, either, because "this year the Eastern half of the country has offered phenomenal [good] observing conditions."

Finally the scientists reached a consensus that the phenomenon was real (many had seen it themselves) and that a network of instrument stations should be organized to photograph it and analyze it with technical devices.

Just before the meeting closed, Teller said that his calculations of the expected noise level of any material object with the green fireball's features suggested that it wasn't solid but an electro-optic phenomenon. That, Bradbury retorted, would be even more difficult to explain.

This is Part One of a three-part article.