

## Retired Air Force Balloon Expert Expands on Origin of 'Majestic 12' UFO Hoax

DAVID E. THOMAS

B.D. "Duke" Gildenberg worked for many years in the United States Air Force (USAF) Skyhook Balloon program, run out of Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo, New Mexico. The program was involved with numerous top-secret activities on the White Sands Missile Range in southern New Mexico. Some of the Skyhook balloons were five times larger than the Hindenberg Zeppelin's seven million cubic feet, carried payloads up to five tons, and flew at altitudes above twenty miles. They were undoubtedly responsible for numerous Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) sightings attributed elsewhere to extraterrestrial spacecraft.

Recently Gildenberg has been researching the origins of "Majestic 12," a supposed secret government group with responsibility for UFO-related activities, like reverse engineering of the "alien ship" rumor says was recovered at Roswell. Prominent UFO author William Moore released the first of the purported MJ-12 documents on May 29, 1987, along with Jaime Shandera and Stanton Friedman (Peebles 1994). Philip J. Klass has found numerous flaws which prove that the documents are forgeries, most notably that President Truman's signature on a key MJ-12 memo was photocopied from a legitimate, non-UFO related letter (Klass 1990). Several other eccentricities, such as date formats, suggested links to William Moore himself (Klass 1989).

Gildenberg's studies led him to focus on two men involved with MJ-12: Sgt. Richard C. Doty, formerly a special agent with the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) at Kirtland AFB in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Paul Bennewitz, president of a small physics firm (Thunder Scientific Lab) in Albuquerque, and also a UFO investigator for the Aerial Phenomena Research

Organization (APRO). Bennewitz was very active in UFOlogy, eventually coining the now-famous terms "grays" and "extraterrestrial biological entities (EBEs)." He was routed to Sgt. Doty in November of 1980, when he approached AFOSI for information on UFO sightings. Doty himself became heavily involved in UFOlogy, even appearing as secret informant "Falcon" on a program entitled "UFO Cover-up? Live!" televised nationally October 14, 1988 (Peebles 1994).

In the summer of 1980, Bennewitz began to record strange radio signals in the vicinity of the Manzano Weapons Storage Area (then a repository for nuclear warheads southeast of Albuquerque on the eastern edge of Kirtland AFB). He snuck around the area and photographed strange lights emanating from Coyote Canyon, a remote test area on Kirtland just south of the Manzano facility. But even though Bennewitz's many UFO claims were later severely tarnished by his mental problems (Peebles 1994), the curious activities near Coyote Canyon were corroborated by more credible sources, including the Military Police. For example, MPs reported suspicious aerial observations over Coyote Canyon on August 8, August 11, and September 2, 1980 (Good 1988). Armed with Bennewitz's observations, Doty contacted William Moore and provided material related to what was called secret "Project Aquarius."

The UFO researchers eventually connected Project Aquarius to covert "UFO"-related activity at Holloman, and also linked it to a site in Montana. Gildenberg thinks Project Aquarius can be directly related to a Cold War project actually called "Project Gopher," and also called WS119L. (WS stands for "Weapons System," an intentional misnomer. It was not really a weapons system.) The program was so classified that even a top-secret briefing for some top CIA officials did

not reveal it (Klass 1983, p. 17).

Gildenberg participated directly in the WS119L project, which involved using high-altitude balloons to carry reconnaissance cameras directly over Soviet territory, taking full advantage of confusion between its flights and "UFOs" whenever possible. When Russian premier Khrushchev banged his shoe on a table at the United Nations in 1955, that table also held a large object—a balloon-supported recon camera—from the WS119L program itself. The 119L program was directly linked to project Moby Dick, also heavily involved in UFO lore (Peebles 1991).

The MJ-12 documents included a supposed top-secret briefing for President-elect Eisenhower on Roswell and aliens, in which General Nathan Twining participated. There actually was a classified briefing for Eisenhower, but it didn't concern Roswell. The briefing was conducted by Rand Corporation, whose officials monitored WS-119L and other classified reconnaissance programs. General Twining was involved because he was the top military figure involved with WS-119L.

But Gildenberg says the MJ-12 connections go well beyond the one linking "Aquarius" with WS119L. The Coyote Canyon sightings Bennewitz made were reported to Doty, and eventually to Moore, and ultimately led directly to the creation of the MJ-12 "conspiracy" legend.

It turns out that Gildenberg knows what Bennewitz saw in the summer of 1980 at Coyote Canyon. It happens that Gildenberg's Skyhook group was flying tethered balloons in support of a highly classified program in Coyote Canyon on the exact days the MP's reported activity. Gildenberg's Skyhook balloons were not themselves classified, but the payload they supported was.

In addition to the tethered Skyhooks, Gildenberg would release small pilot balloons ("pibals") to measure wind speeds

during the experiments. The illuminated half of the Skyhook support balloon definitely presented a "saucer-like" appearance, and the bright lights shining on the small, rapidly ascending pibal balloons produced a "zooming/vanishing" effect when the lights were turned off. These effects combined to produce what looked like flying saucers skirting erratically over Coyote Canyon.

Gildenberg has uncovered many other connections between the dark world of UFO conspiracy and the equally gloomy world of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, part of the Roswell mythology involves a crashed alien ship near Corona, New Mexico; and, some 1980s information searches under "Corona" revealed secret classifications. Gildenberg recalls that small animals such as chimps were flown in Project Discoverer nose cones as unclassified projects, not hidden from the public. But a secret military project was also included in some Discoverer nose cones, and the name of *this* project was Project Corona! Corona was actually an early satellite reconnaissance program, but it wasn't declassified until the 1990s. Thus, UFO researchers looking for information on "Corona" in the 1980s would find a tantalizing but classified trail.

Gildenberg claims many of the mysteries of the conspiracy-laden UFO world are explained, once the veils of secrecy are pulled from America's own clandestine Cold War experiments.

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- David E. Thomas, a physicist, is president of *New Mexicans for Science and Reason* and a *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* consulting editor.

## L. Sprague de Camp: Erudite Writer on Archaeology, Ancient Engineering, and Pseudoscience (and Science Fiction Too)

L. Sprague de Camp, author of more than 100 science fiction and fantasy novels plus nonfiction works on archaeology, ancient engineering, and fringe-science and pseudoscience, died November 11, 2000, in Plano, Texas, where he lived. He was 92. His wife, Catherine, his constant companion and frequent co-author, had died in April 2000.

De Camp was a founding CSICOP Fellow. In fact, accompanied by Catherine, he participated in the conference at which CSICOP was formally founded, "The New Irrationalisms: Antiscience and Pseudoscience," April 30–May 1, 1976, at the State University of New York at Buffalo. One of his comments there pungently countered the litany from credulous believers that you must always keep an open mind. "Many people have developed minds that are not only open, but gaping," he said.

He also spoke at the conference of the circular logic often used by pseudoscientists, such as UFO enthusiasts who start by assuming what they wish to prove—that flying saucers exist. He outlined five criteria for judging UFO contact reports. And he spoke of the tendency for pseudoscientific ideas—such as astrology, which by the beginning of the 1900s had been thoroughly discredited—to keep popping up in new guise: "In the history of cultism, one is always experiencing a feeling of *déjà vu*."

He also lambasted the then-highly popular ancient-astronaut works of Erich von Däniken. "Von Däniken's books are solid masses of misstatements, errors, and wild guesses presented as facts, unsupported by anything remotely resembling scientific data." He said a thorough analysis would require a book several times larger than the original. "It would take years of my time; and, if I were mad enough to write it, who then would read it?"

De Camp, a native of New York City,

was one of the leading early figures in science fiction, getting his start in the 1930s and 1940s at the same time as colleagues such as Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Lester del Rey, and Frederik Pohl. John W. Campbell, the influential editor of *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine, pointed to de Camp's stories as an example of the kind of science fiction he was looking for.

They were based on imaginative but careful and reasonable extrapolation from contemporary science. De Camp was known for his erudition (especially about history), scientific accuracy, polished writing, and "swashbuckling" style.

Although best known as a fiction writer, de Camp was a meticulous researcher who brought his interests in science, history, and archaeology and his background as an engineer (B.S. in aeronautical engineering from California Institute of Technology in 1930; masters from Stevens Institute of Technology in 1933) to his nonfiction works. During World War II, de Camp, Heinlein, and Asimov independently worked on research projects at the Materials Laboratory of the Naval Air Experimental Station at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. "For three-and-a-half years, Heinlein, Asimov, and I navigated desks and fought the war with flashing slide rules," de Camp later wrote.

(In a letter to me in June 1981, de Camp addressed claims in a newly published crank book, *The Philadelphia Experiment*, that during World War II scientists at the Philadelphia Navy Yard had developed a way to make a ship invisible. He pointed to how he, Asimov, and Heinlein were all there. "If any experiment remotely resembling that described by Messrs. Berlitz and Moore had taken place. I am sure we should have heard about it. I need hardly say that we heard not a word, nor was any of our own work along such lines.")

De Camp's book *Ancient Engineers*, published in several editions, chronicles the ingenious methods engineers throughout history (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Hellenistic, early and late Roman, Oriental, and European engineers) used in constructing great works and monuments. According to a current list on Barnes & Noble's Web site, *Ancient Engineers* is his best-selling in-print book.

For *Great Cities of the Ancient World* (1972) he traveled thousands of miles over several years to study thirteen ancient sites. *Citadels of Mystery* (1964, with Catherine) explored twelve wonders of the ancient world; the back cover of the 1989 Ballantine edition described him as "a man with the mind of an archaeologist, the heart of an adventurer, and the soul of Indiana Jones."

Several of his books were about fringe-science and pseudoscience. Among them are *Lost Continents: The Atlantis Theme in History, Science, and Literature*, described as "the most detailed study ever compiled of lost continent mythology"; *Spirits, Stars, and Spells* (1966, with Catherine), about magic and occultism; *The Ragged Edges of Science* (Owlswick Press, 1980), a collection of articles on the borderland between "the bright-lit land of science on one side, and the dark domain of magic, occultism, and pseudoscience on the other"; and *The Fringe of the Unknown* (Prometheus 1983), another collection of articles on borderline or controversial matters in science and technology. It included chapters on Mad Men of Science, Orthodoxy in Science, Hoaxes in Science, and Little Green Men from Afar.

In 1995, Prometheus published his *The Ape-Man Within*, a book of social anthropology that considered why people behave in such unreasonable, ineffective ways, exploring how viewing others as adversaries had been a survival trait in our primitive past.

De Camp's writings in the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* include "The Uses of Credulity" (Spring 1986, reprinted in the *SI* anthology *The Hundredth Monkey*, 1991) and his tribute to Isaac Asimov ("one of my oldest, closest, and

most beloved friends") in the Fall 1992 "Celebration of Isaac Asimov" issue (reprinted in the 1997 edition of Asimov's *The Roving Mind*).

In "The Uses of Credulity," he considered that "when a characteristic like human credulity becomes so widespread in a species, we must suspect that it plays a part in enabling the species to survive, even though we may not know what that function is." He said some credulity is necessary for people to embrace an ideology, and ideology "is one of the lubricants, like liquor and hypocrisy, that enable men to live together. . . ." Yet ideologies can and often do get out of hand. "So we must continue to combat the more destructive ideologies. The scientific debunker's job may be compared to that of the trash collector. The fact that the garbage truck goes by today does not mean that there will not be another load tomorrow. But if the garbage were not collected at all, the results would be much worse. . . ."

—Kendrick Frazier

Kendrick Frazier is Editor of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*.

## Aromatherapy Company Settles Lawsuit Disputing Health Claims

Los Angeles attorney Morsé Mehrban has won a civil lawsuit against Aroma Vera, Inc., a leading manufacturer of aromatherapy supplies and personal-care products. The suit, filed in 1997, charged that the company and its president Marcel Lavabre had violated California's Business and Professions Code by making advertising false claims about many products.

Mehrban disputed that the products can promote health and wellbeing, relax the body, relax the mind, enhance mood, purify the air, are antidotes to air pollution, relieve fatigue, tone the body, nourish the skin, promote circulation, alleviate feminine cramps, or do various

other things claimed by the company.

Mehrban's suit sought restitution for consumers, cessation of these claims, and payment of reasonable attorney fees and costs.

The National Council Against Fraud served as the plaintiff, and I was the expert witness in the case. The case was settled out of court with a \$5,700 payment to Mehrban and a court-approved stipulation prohibiting the defendants from making fifty-seven of the disputed advertising claims within California.

A case summary can be viewed at [www.quackwatch.com/04ConsumerEducation/News/mehrban.html](http://www.quackwatch.com/04ConsumerEducation/News/mehrban.html); the consent agreement is at [www.quackwatch.com/04ConsumerEducation/News/mehrbansettlement.html](http://www.quackwatch.com/04ConsumerEducation/News/mehrbansettlement.html).

—Stephen Barrett

Stephen Barrett, M.D., is Board Chairman of Quackwatch, Inc. P.O. Box 1747, Allentown, PA 18105.

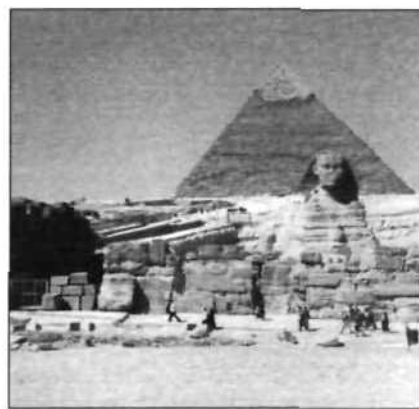


Photo by Benjamin Radford

## Tabloid Busts Fox TV on Pyramid Special

Tabloid television shows are better known for promoting pseudoscience and the paranormal than being skeptical of them. But the show *Inside Edition* recently exposed trickery and deceit on the 1999 Fox TV special "Opening the Lost Tombs: Live From Egypt," hosted by Maury Povich. The television "event" was one of the most successful TV



specials in recent years, garnering worldwide publicity with its promise that viewers could watch as ancient Egyptian tombs would be unearthed on live television. In the program, Povich and Egyptologist Zahi Hawass explored pyramids and found mummies and ancient artifacts, apparently for the first time.

The *Inside Edition* segment, "Povich and the Tombs," shows that much of the special was not in fact a dramatic live discovery as promised, but instead a staged event. The segment was reported by Matt Meagher and aired in December 2000.

Doubts about the authenticity of Fox's claims came from many quarters, including University of Bristol Egyptologist Aidan Dodson, who said of Hawass, "He's very much giving the impression that these things are being found in front of the camera, which is certainly not the case. Zahi Hawass is probably one of the most distinguished Egyptian Egyptologists around. There's no way that Zahi would ever have opened anything live unless he knew what was on the other side of the door."

Under questioning from Meagher, Hawass admitted that in most cases he knew exactly what they would find. Meagher asked him, "When you're down in a tomb with Maury Povich, and you open a wooden coffin, is that the first time you had seen the coffin?" Hawass: "Me? . . . No. That burial chamber belonged to the tomb that we found a month ago. Before the show."

Hawass explained that most of the things he showed live had indeed been seen before, emphasizing that it was live *for the audience*, not necessarily for him or the world. When Hawass was asked if he thought that the viewers believed that these tombs were being opened for the very first time, he responded that he didn't know. "I don't care about live or not live!" Hawass said.

There was also some question about the accuracy of claims regarding another pyramid. Said Meagher, "Later in the show, viewers were told they were witnessing the opening of this Queen's

Pyramid—a pyramid Fox said hadn't been explored in 5,000 years." In fact, the pyramid had been previously explored several times and written about as early as the 1800s. Questioning Hawass, Meagher quoted from the Fox special: "We opened the Queen's Pyramid—See what no one has seen for five millennia." Is that accurate? Hawass responded, "That's . . . that's . . . no."

"I cannot discover a tomb in two hours," the beleaguered Hawass said. "What do you want me to tell you? It was a set-up? Okay, fine."

In fairness to Hawass, it seemed that he was being called to answer for many of Fox's misstatements. The respected Egyptologist, in his love for his work and honest desire to interest the world in ancient Egypt, had apparently been nudged into bending the truth for the special. For his part, Povich said that he had understood that the discoveries he and Hawass were making had never been

seen before by anyone.

In fact, similar allegations were published in the September/October 1999 *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* by Richard Carrier. In his special report "Flash! Fox News Reports that Aliens May Have Built the Pyramids of Egypt!" Carrier wrote, "The 'reality' aspect of the show is also suspect; much of it seemed staged. It was apparent that Hawass has explored many of these sites before, identifying art and translating inscriptions, in preparation for the show (and then, perhaps, 'setting them up' by covering them with sand)."

Even without the most recent revelations, the Fox special was shameless in its approach. Though reality and good science surfaced now and then, much of the show included theories of advanced civilizations, aliens, psychic Edgar Cayce, UFOs, the Face on Mars, and Atlantis.

—Benjamin Radford

Benjamin Radford is Managing Editor of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. □



## W.V. Quine (1908–2000)

The skeptics community has lost a powerful supporter. Willard Van Orman Quine, considered to be one of the leading contemporary American philosophers, died on December 25, 2000. A proponent of pragmatism, he was a defender of scientific methodology as the most reliable path to knowledge. He defended a naturalized epistemology. For Quine, sense experience is integrated with mathematical and scientific abstraction to postulate theories about the world, that are tested or disconfirmed.

Quine was one of the original 25 scientists, philosophers, and skeptics who endorsed a statement sponsoring the formation of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, on May 1, 1976. He was elected as one of the first Fellows of CSICOP, along with other distinguished philosophers, such as Brand Blanchard (Yale), Ernest Nagel (Columbia), Sidney Hook (NYU), and Antony Flew (Reading University). Quine taught all during his life at Harvard University. He became president of the American Philosophical Association and was elected as a Humanist Laureate of the International Academy of Humanism. He was also a founding contributing editor of *Philo*, the leading freethought theoretical magazine in the world, now published at the Center for Inquiry. Among his writings were *From a Logical Point of View* (1953), *Word and Object* (1960), *Philosophy of Logic* (1970), *Pursuit of Truth* (reissued in 1992), and *From Stimulus to Science* (1995).

—Paul Kurtz