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Leonard Weiss, 'My Involvement with the 1979 Vela Satellite (6911) Event'

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Summary:

Statement made by Leonard Weiss about his memories of the 1979 VELA Incident.

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My Involvement with the 1979 Vela Satellite (6911) Event

Leonard Weiss November 22, 2019

Oral History Workshop on the Vela 6911 Event

My introduction to the “mysterious flash” event that was detected by Vela 6911 on September 22, 1979 was by means of an ABC News report by reporter John Scali that aired on October 25. Scali’s report raised the issue of a possible clandestine nuclear test off the coast of South Africa. After a few phone calls to sources within the Carter Administration, I was informed that a scientific panel would be formed to examine the possible sources of the “flash”. My sources said that at least some of the scientists who were responsible for monitoring the satellite’s detections believed that a test had taken place. The Carter Administration, responding to the furor that Scali’s report created on Capitol Hill, began scheduling classified briefings for selected members of Congress and their staffs. Because of my work for Senator John Glenn on nuclear issues and my position as Glenn’s staff director and chief adviser on the Senate Subcommittee on Energy and Nuclear Proliferation, I was invited to a number of briefings on the Vela event given by members of the intelligence agencies and others stationed at Los Alamos. One of those briefings dealt with a training exercise by the South African navy that took place while their main naval base was closed and occurred over a week that included the time of the Vela event. Knowledge of this naval exercise was considered so sensitive by the U.S. that when the Washington Post published a leak of this information, the Carter Administration launched an investigation to try to find the leaker. This action of the South African navy was later used by some observers as possible evidence of South African participation in the nuclear test detected by Vela 6911. But it was two other briefings I received that were particularly notable to me.

In one of them, conducted by Alan Locke, the history of the Vela event and the Carter Administration response was reviewed. By that time, based on my own sources and the respect I had for the scientists at Los Alamos and AFTAC who were involved in the recording and analysis of the Vela event, I had formed some serious questions about the nature of the event and made it plain at the briefing that I thought the probable source of the “flash” was a nuclear test. My questioning of Locke caused Louis Nosenzo, who was present at the briefing and represented OES in the State Department, to take me aside during a temporary recess of the briefing, and caution me that if I persisted in suggesting that a nuclear test had taken place, my reputation would suffer and I would be classed in the same category as George Keegan. Keegan, who had been in charge of intelligence for the U.S. Air Force, famously and erroneously claimed that a Soviet rocket test facility was a directed energy weapon facility that meant the U.S. was in mortal danger and far behind the Soviets in development of the technology. Keegan was publicly embarrassed when the truth was revealed and he became persona-non-grata with the Carter White House. I was surprised that a Carter State Department official would issue a veiled threat because of my view of the “flash” expressed in a non-public setting, but all it did was to make the administration look desperate to me in its desire to promote a benign explanation for the Vela event.

At another briefing which took place a few months after the Ruina Panel report had been delivered to the White House, I met with John Marcum, Senior Adviser at OSTP, Marcum had apparently become the point man at OSTP to deal with Congressional concerns about the flash. He was prepared to respond to questions raised by articles in Science Magazine and The Washington Star in which Alan Berman, Director of the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL), was quoted as saying that his lab had obtained data showing unequivocally that a nuclear test had taken place at the time of the detection of the flash. Moreover, there were reports that a researcher at the University of Tennessee named vanMiddlesworth had discovered radioactive iodine in the thyroids of Australian sheep grazing in the likely path of fallout from a nuclear test consistent with the timing of the Vela event. Marcum claimed that vanMiddlesworth’s data was sent to an environmental measurements lab in New York (a DOE contractor) who concluded that there was nothing in the data supportive of nuclear fallout and that AFTAC agreed. The Australian government was asked and also claimed no evidence of nuclear fallout in the area of the sheep,

but had no data on sheep thyroids at the time. Marcum also said that published data on Strontium 90 at Santiago Chile was the result of an atmospheric dump that lacked radon daughters; and published data on Polonium 210 at Antarctica for the period including the flash was a typo. He said that DIA concluded that only the Vela 6911 signal supports a nuclear event, but that is what they believe occurred. Indeed, some time after the Ruina panel's report had been delivered to the White House I saw printouts of so-called zoo events, bhngmeter traces that were understood to be spurious results of the electronic recordings and not to be the result of nuclear tests, but none of those traces looked anything like the double hump that was recorded by Vela 6911 on September 22, 1979. Thus, Marcum's briefing gave me more to think about regarding the question of the flash, but did not shake my belief that DIA was right about the flash being a nuclear test.

Another interesting event that I ultimately connected to the Vela issue took place at around Christmas time in 1980, Senator Glenn and I were invited to a party at a venue which might have been the State Department but could have been at some other Washington venue. During the celebration, while Glenn and I were chatting, Gerard Smith, U.S. Representative for Nonproliferation Matters walked over to us with drink in hand to join our chat. Smith had met with both Glenn and me on prior occasions to talk about nuclear agreements with other countries, particularly Euratom, that were required by the Nuclear Nonproliferation Act of 1978. (Smith was unhappy with the attempt by the legislation to force Euratom to renegotiate its nuclear cooperation agreement with the U.S. and told Glenn in my presence that Glenn had given him "an impossible task") But now, at the party, Smith was more concerned with Glenn's intent to introduce legislation to block an NRC decision to allow a shipment of uranium fuel for India's Tarapur reactors under an old contract to proceed. (Shipments under a new contract were barred by the NNPA because of India's failure to adhere to full scope safeguards for all its nuclear materials, and Glenn wanted to remove any exceptions under an old contract). When Smith told Glenn he thought letting the shipment go would be a good nonproliferation move, Glenn disagreed, saying that the Indians had been "bad guys" on nonproliferation issues. At this, Smith bristled and said "You think the Indians are bad gguys? If you want to talk about bad guys, talk about the Israelis!" And with that both men backed off and Smith took his leave. I was stunned by Smith's comment and committed it to memory. I wasn't sure exactly what Smith had in mind; the Israelis had vexed many State Department officials over the years with their deception on Dimona and their ostensible theft of HEU from the NUMEC corporation in Apollo Pennsylvania. But those events happened years before. There was now a new issue with the mysterious flash, and in retrospect I think Smith may have been telling Glenn that he believed those analysts in the intelligence community who thought Israel was the most likely perpetrator of a nuclear test detected by Vela 6911. But I didn't think that at the time and the question of Israel's culpability didn't settle in my mind until a few months later as a result of an episode in Glenn's office in March 1981.

On or about March 6, 1981 I received a phone call in my office from a CBS reporter named Robert Pierpoint. Pierpoint had been working on the Vela event and had heard that I had some "interesting" views about its origin. He asked if I was willing to come on camera to talk about it, and I said "yes". A couple of hours later, Pierpoint showed up at my office with a CBS camera crew. While they were setting up, my office phone rang and my secretary said that Senator Glenn was on the line. After I said hello, Glenn said he had received a message from the White House that I had scheduled an on-camera interview about the Vela event and he asked if that was true. I told him there was a camera crew setting up in my office as we were speaking. He then said I should come to his office right away to discuss this. I excused myself and told Pierpoint I needed to go to Glenn's office, which was a three minute walk from my own. When I arrived in Glenn's inner office, I was surprised to find, in addition to Glenn, Steve Avakian and Kathy Prosser. Avakian had been Glenn's press secretary during Glenn's first senatorial term and was his campaign manager during his successful re-election campaign. He was now a political adviser. Kathy Prosser was Glenn's secretary and later became his Administrative Assistant. They all looked grim when I arrived. Glenn began telling me that I should have informed him of the scheduled interview. He then asked me what I intended to say. I said, "I intend to say that in my opinion the flash was a nuclear test." He then sharply exclaimed, "You can't say that!" He went on to say that the White House was greatly upset about my planned interview, which they told him "could cause a serious foreign policy

problem for the United States". In fact, he said, the issue was so sensitive that the White House wanted to avoid creating a telephone record of a discussion with him about my interview. According to Glenn, the White House found a well connected friend of Steve Avakian who briefed Avakian on the White House's concerns and told Avakian to pass the White House's concerns to Glenn. They would have someone in the White House call Glenn to simply tell him that Avakian had an important message for him without mentioning the message's content. Hearing all this I told Glenn I would go back to my office and cancel the interview. At which Avakian exclaimed, "No! You have to go through with the interview, but you can't say there was a nuclear test." I was nonplussed at all this. I had been working for Glenn for five years at that point and would go on to work for him for a total of twenty three years, twenty two of which were as his staff director and science adviser on the Senate Subcommittee on Energy and Nuclear Proliferation and the full Committee on Governmental Affairs (now called Homeland Security). This was the only time Glenn had ever told me what to say or not say in an interview. This settled the issue for me as to the nature of the Vela event. Despite the report of the Ruina Panel which had been released some months before and concluded that the flash was most probably not a nuclear event, the attempt to silence me on the issue simply reinforced my view that a nuclear test had occurred. But I concluded more than that when Kathy Prosser, in response to my question as to who in the White House had called Glenn, said it was John Marcum. Marcum, at that point, was a Carter Administration holdover now working as senior adviser for OSTP in the Reagan Administration. So the fact that this issue was raising waves on a bi-partisan basis caused me to conclude that the likely perpetrator of the nuclear test was not South Africa, as had been suspected by some people, but rather Israel. At any rate, I went back to my office and dutifully gave an interview to Pierpoint, but did not say that I believed the Vela event was a nuclear test. Instead, I reiterated Glenn's formulation of the White House's view that the event could create "a serious foreign policy issue for the United States", and that "just because a White House panel says that the probability of it being a nuclear event is less than half does not mean that we should forget about it and go to sleep," The interview was broadcast on the evening of March 6, 1981 and included an interview with Jack Ruina, who headed the White House panel. It is available on YouTube.

I did not talk about this again for a few years, but I finally decided at one point that sufficient time had passed to tell a few people about it. Avner Cohen had become a friend and was preparing galleys for his first book on Israel's nuclear program, which at his request I later helped him publicize. When I told Avner the story about Glenn he told me he had heard some version of it and asked if I would allow him to put it in his forthcoming book. I demurred because I wasn't ready to go public with it a big way. However, about three weeks later, I received a call from Jeff Richelson, who was writing a book that ultimately became "Spying on the Bomb". Richelson had heard about my skepticism of the Ruina Panel conclusions and asked if he could interview me about it for his book. I decided to tell him about my experience in the Glenn office and invited him to come to my home in Maryland for the interview. He came and recorded it, and in return left me with a number of typed chapters of his forthcoming book which he was finishing up.

I then turned to other nonproliferation issues (specifically involving India and Pakistan), retired from the Senate, and spent a few years (2000-2006) as a consultant for the Center on Global Security Research at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. I didn't pick up the Vela issue again until I came to Stanford University in 2006 as a Science Fellow with the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC). I have remained affiliated with CISAC since then as a Visiting Scholar and Network Affiliate. During a seminar at CISAC on some nonproliferation issue, the question of the Vela event came up in Q&A. I then related my involvement with it and told the story of my experience in the Glenn office, which elicited an audible gasp from one person in the room.

In 2010 I decided to write the story for public consumption, and included it as part of a paper entitled, "Israel's 1979 Nuclear Test and the U.S. Government Coverup". I sent the paper to the Nonproliferation Review which had earlier published a couple of articles of mine on nonproliferation and energy issues. It took a long time for the report of the two referees to be sent to me, and when it came I was shocked. The paper was given a completely incompetent review by the referees, who rejected the paper apparently on their belief that by using the word "coverup" I was saying that the

scientists on the Ruina panel were consciously engaged in a conspiracy to hide the true nature of the Vela event. Of course, I did no such thing. There was indeed a coverup by the Carter White House which used high level classification and the Ruina panel conclusion to hide or at least obscure the truth of the Vela event as opposed to an outright denial. This was a subtlety that was either beyond the understanding of the referees or a willful refusal to face the fact that distinguished scientists can be used by political operatives pursuing an agenda of their own. Substantively, my views reflected those of Alan Berman, former research director of the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, whom I interviewed in 1982 about the Vela event and whose views of the event had been reported in 1980 by Science magazine and the Washington Star. In any case, the incompetence of the referees made me lose confidence in the Nonproliferation Review, so instead of attempting to argue with the referees I chose to simply send the paper to the journal Middle East Policy, whose referees found no problem with it, including with its use of the word "coverup". But to be sure there would be no such problem in the future, my next paper on the Vela issue clarified exactly why the word coverup applied to the U.S. government was appropriate and I made clear that I did not believe the Ruina panel members committed a political act rather than giving their best scientific appraisal of the Vela event based on the (limited) information made available to them by the Carter Administration.

The main lacuna in the Vela story is that no one in Israel or elsewhere has come forward with a verifiable story of having witnessed or participated in the nuclear test. Seymour Hersh claimed in his book, "The Samson Option" that his reporting of the nuclear test (which in his account was one of three tests) was based on Israeli sources, but there has been no further information regarding those sources since then. Five years ago, I learned that a composer and musical instrument maker named Victor Gama had composed a multimedia work based on the Vela 6911 detection and a diary which had come into the hands of a South African writer and poet named Stacy Hardy with whom Gama was working. The work had been commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and was performed at Stanford where I saw and heard it in 2015. The Music Department had arranged for Gama to give a talk about his commissioned work, and I was invited to attend the talk. I learned that Gama's work included a narrative that made South Africa the perpetrator of a nuclear test that was detected by Vela 6911. Afterward, I went up to him and told him that the current view of most observers was that Israel was the perpetrator, possibly with South African support. He accepted this and I discovered at the performance that the narrative now included a reference to Israel. But more important was the question of the diary that the work's narrative was ostensibly based on. Gama gave me Stacy Hardy's name and said she had seen and used the diary on which Gama's work was based. I wrote to Hardy seeking more information about the diary, which she claimed was that of a female naval officer who had witnessed the nuclear test. Although Hardy had a relatively detailed description of the person who ostensibly wrote the diary, she said she never had possession of the diary beyond the time needed to write her own transcription of it, which was the basis for the narrative in Gama's work. Moreover she would not provide more information to identify the diary's writer because she claimed she had been threatened by South African military personnel, and was concerned about the safety of the diary's writer. In the absence of further information, it is difficult to put much credence in the story of this diary, but Hardy and Gama continue to claim it is real.