THE SOUTHWESTERN UFO WAVE OF 1957

BY ANTONIO F. RULLÁN

Fifty years ago in November, a major UFO wave took place in the United States that filled the newspapers with UFO stories. This wave followed the classic waves of 1947 and 1952. The 1957 wave was similar to the 1947 wave in its explosive nature but had a greater number of reported sightings.[1] The UFO wave of 1952 had more reported cases but was not an explosive wave; UFO reports came in gradually throughout the year. The 1957 wave stands out because it was the first U.S. wave involving vehicle interference (VI) cases. It was these UFO stories of close encounters between automobiles and UFOs that drew the most media attention. This wave, however, was not the first documented VI wave because a similar one had occurred in France in October 1954.

While the 1957 wave had a broad distribution that included South America, Europe, and Australia, my focus here is narrowly on the set of cases in the southwestern United States. The 1957 UFO wave started in the Southwest, where it was particularly intense for nine days, and then fizzled abruptly while continuing throughout the country. I concentrate on the vehicle interference cases because they represent the key change that this wave brought to the media, Project Blue Book, and the American psyche. While these cases were not the first of this type reported to Blue Book, or the first documented in the press, their sudden appearance and concentration in the Southwest dominated the press for the first time in America.[2] And while nocturnal light cases were the most numerous type of report, it was the VI cases that drew the most media attention. They were richer in content and more difficult to explain away.

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For case compilation, I relied on the UFOCAT database and the Blue Book case files, plus collections of newspaper clippings provided by Loren Gross and Jan Aldrich. In this article, the Southwest includes Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. The additional newspaper clippings added 41 new UFO cases, including five additional VI cases (beyond those included in Rodeghier's vehicle interference catalog, 1981).

TIME DISTRIBUTION

Since the wave took place mainly in November, I wanted to look at all the sightings in the region from October through December to determine the size of the peak and rate of increase and decline of reports. A total of 209 UFO cases were found for this time period in the Southwest. Twenty-four of these cases were VI cases, 157 were nocturnal/mysterious lights, 19 were daylight disks, 5 were CE1 cases, and 4 were non-VI CE2 cases. Figure 1 shows a histogram of all the UFO cases reported to the press and Blue Book during this three-month period. The chart separates the VI cases that

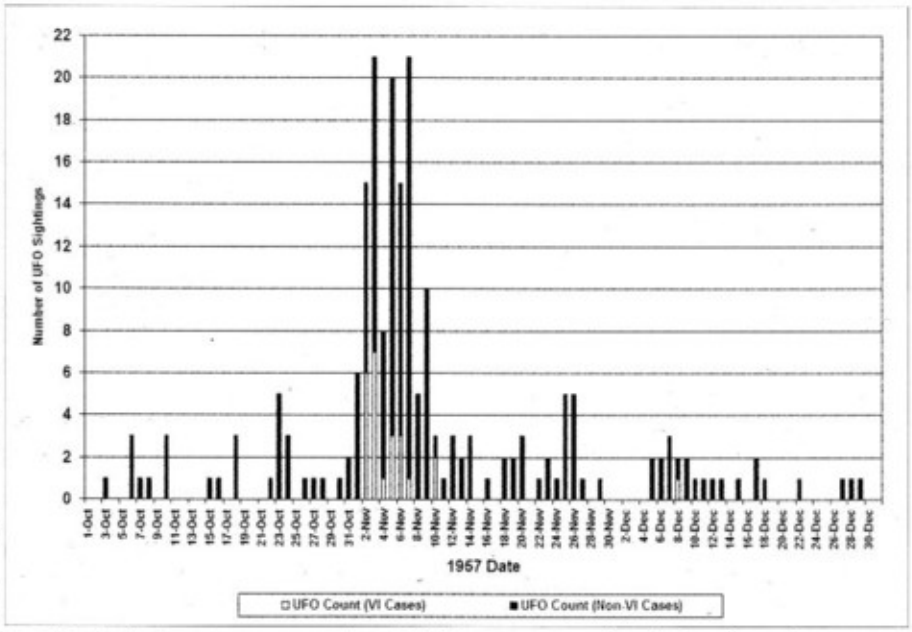

Fig. 1. Frequency count per day of UFO cases reported in the Southwest between October 1 and December 31, 1957.

reported electromagnetic interference with the witnesses' car (i.e., engine stoppage, headlights failed, radio interference) from all the others.

Figure 1 shows that the Southwest VI wave started on November 2, peaked on November 3, and lasted about nine days. By early December, the number of reported UFO cases matched the same level reported in October before the wave started. Of interest is that the sudden increase in the number of VI cases being reported occurred at the same time as the sudden increase in non-VI cases reported during this 9-day period. This correlation suggests that they were not independent events.

The 24 vehicle interference UFO cases were similar in general aspects and different in the details. Most of these cases involved a glowing egg-shaped ball of light that either hovered near the car or flew over the car causing the car engine, headlights, radio, and other electronic devices to fail or stop momentarily. Table 1 summarizes these cases and lists the type of vehicular effects that were described by the witnesses.

Whatever happened in the Southwest that first week of November, it was sudden, spread like wildfire, and then suddenly stopped. The pattern fits Jerome Clark's (1996, p. 575) five-step characterization of an Explosive Wave:

1. A triggering event of inherently spectacular nature and high publicity. (The triggering events were the Levelland sightings that occurred between November 2 and 3 and which made the AP wires by the next day.)

2. An outpouring of reports favored with extensive and generally positive media coverage during the next few days.

Table 1. Summary of 24 UFO cases that involved vehicle interference

No.	Date	Central Time	Location	Effects on Vehicle
1	Nov. 2	3:30 a.m.	Canadian, Texas	Extinguished car headlights
2	Nov. 2	8:00 p.m.	Amarillo, Texas	Car engine and battery died
3	Nov. 2	8:30 p.m.	Between Seminole and Seagraves, Texas	Car engine and headlights died
4	Nov. 2	10:50 p.m.	4 miles west of Levelland, Texas	Car headlights went out and motor died
5	Nov. 2	11:35 p.m.	Shallowater, Texas	Car lights and radio went out
6	Nov. 2	11:50 p.m.	4 miles east of Levelland, Texas	Car engine died and headlights went out
7	Nov. 3	12:00 a.m.	10 miles NE of Levelland, Texas	Car engine died and headlights went out
8	Nov. 3	12:05 a.m.	9 miles east of Levelland, one mile west of Smyer	Ammeter began jumping, then motor gradually died, then the lights and radio went out
9	Nov. 3	12:15 a.m.	11 miles north of Levelland, near Whitharral, Texas	Car engine died and headlights went out
10	Nov. 3	12:45 a.m.	5 miles west of Levelland, Texas	Truck engine died and lights went out
11	Nov. 3	1:15 a.m.	5 miles NW of Levelland, Texas	Truck stalled and the lights went out
12	Nov. 3	9:00 p.m.	Palo Duro Canyon, Amarillo, Texas	Killed the car engine, lights, and battery
13	Nov. 3	10:00 p.m.	Roswell, New Mexico	Car lights sputtered and went out
14	Nov. 4	2:30 p.m.	Orogrande, New Mexico	Car radio and engine failed.
15	Nov. 5	7:30 p.m.	El Paso, Texas	Car stalled and lights went out
16	Nov. 5	8:30 p.m.	Hobbs, New Mexico	Car light and engines failed
17	Nov. 5	9:30 p.m.	San Antonio, Texas	Car lights, radio and engine failed
18	Nov. 6	12:00 a.m.	Between Hobbs and Carlsbad, New Mexico	Car engine and lights were shut
19	Nov. 6	1:15 a.m.	Santa Fe, New Mexico	Stopped car engine, car clock, and eyewitness's wristwatch
20	Nov. 6	4:30 a.m.	Houston, Texas	Killed car radio and car engine
21	Nov. 7	10:20 a.m.	Orogrande, New Mexico	Affected the car speedometer
22	Nov. 10	7:50 p.m.	Sweetwater, Texas	Car motor stalled and car lights went out
23	Nov. 10	8:20 p.m.	Carrizozo, New Mexico	Shut car lights
24	Dec. 8	5:30 p.m.	Woodward, Oklahoma	Stopped car engine, headlights, radio, heater, and wipers

(This was evidenced by all the newspaper clippings obtained from many towns in New Mexico, Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma that covered the major and local UFO cases.)

3. Followed by the spread of sightings over a widening area. (This was evidenced by the spread of UFO sightings away from Levelland in all directions and generally within a 260-mile radius.)

4. An increase in hoaxes and unfavorable media attention. (The only hoax of which I am aware took place in Grapevine, Texas, on November 6, and it was reported only in the Fort Worth papers. Nevertheless, unfavorable media attention did start on November 5 when the Air Force issued a special press release to the effect that no evidence of UFOs had been found and all but 2% of cases had been explained.)

5. A rapid diminution of reports starting a few days after the peak. (Seven days after the peak, the wave was essentially over in the Southwest.)

Geographical Distribution

The 209 UFO cases reported in the Southwest from October through the end of December 1957 are plotted on the map in Figure 2. VI cases are shown as light-colored pins and non-VI cases are shown as dark-colored pins. The map is centered in Levelland, Texas, where the most famous case took place and where the highest number of VI cases occurred.

Table 2 shows the distribution of reported UFO cases by state. About 80% of all UFO reports and all but one of the VI cases took place in Texas and New Mexico, so sometimes this wave is called the TX-NM Wave of 1957. Of interest, no VI case reports were found in Arizona, Utah, Colorado, or Kansas. This implies that whatever phenomenon was causing the car engine/light shutdowns had a limited range within the Southwest. The UFOCAT database, however, shows that many UFO cases were also reported in California, the Midwest, and the East Coast. Moreover, Rodeghier's VI database includes 19 VI cases in other states during this same period.[3] Thus, if the same VI phenomenon that was observed in the Southwest moved on to the West or the Midwest, then it does not appear to have gone through Arizona, Utah, Kansas, or East Texas because there are no records of VI cases in those regions during the three-month period. This observation suggests that the phenomenon does not spread in a continuous two-dimensional fashion like the weather.

Table 2. Distribution of reported UFO cases (Oct. 1–Dec. 31, 1957) in the Southwestern U.S. by state

State	Texas	New Mexico	Colorado	Oklahoma	Kansas	Arizona	Utah
Total UFO Reports	115	51	10	12	7	12	2

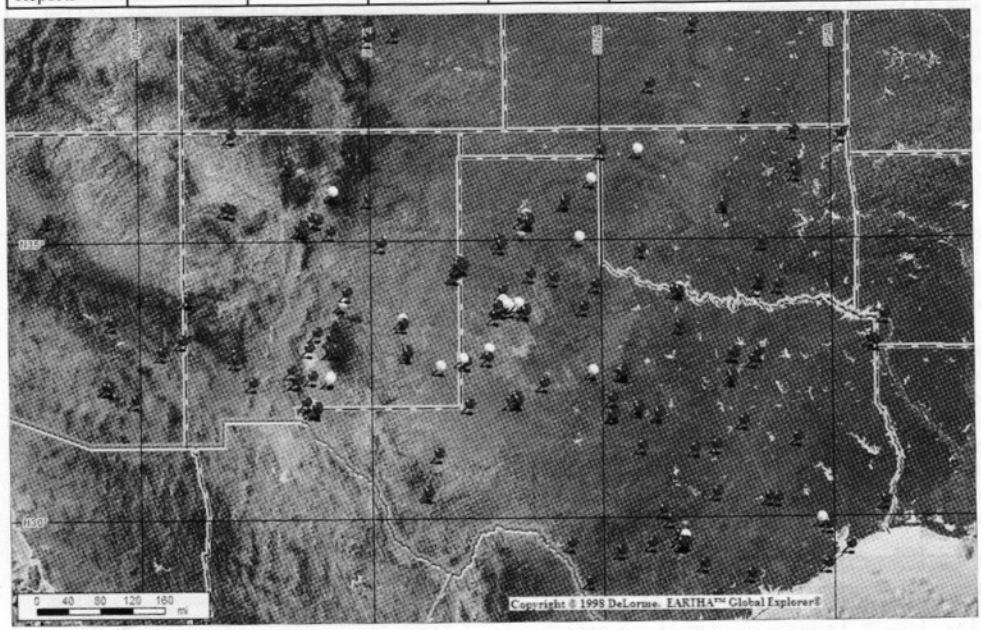

Fig. 2. Map of the U.S. Southwest with dark pins indicating non-VI UFO cases and light pins indicating VI UFO cases (Oct. 1–Dec. 31, 1957).

Before the Levelland UFO reports started coming in (on November 2 at 10:50 p.m. Central), three other VI cases took place in Texas. The first was in Canadian (northeast of Levelland) on November 2 at 3:30 a.m. This was followed by one event in Amarillo at 8:00 p.m. and one south of Levelland (between Seagraves and Seminole) at 8:30 p.m. After November 3, the wave moved southwest towards El Paso, northwest towards Santa Fe, east to Wichita Falls, southeast toward San Antonio and Houston, and northeast toward Woodward, Oklahoma.

On the map in Figure 3, lines are drawn from Levelland (the theoretical hub of VI cases) to the other towns where VI cases were reported that were furthest in that direction from Levelland. During the peak nine-day period, all VI cases and 85% of the non-VI cases occurred within this hexagon.

Table 3. Distance between Levelland and other key towns with VI cases

Target Town	Distance from Levelland (miles)
Wichita Falls, Tex.	224
Woodward, Okla.	259
Santa Fe, N.Mex.	249
El Paso, Tex.	269
San Antonio, Tex.	366
Houston, Tex.	490

During the three-month period (October 1 through Decembe 31), 67% of the non-VI cases occurred within this hexagon The hexagon is not symmetric, and the distances betwee Levelland and the six key towns are shown in Table 3 Figure 3 shows that the explosive Southwest wave of 195 had a limited range. I did not find any VI reports in or nea other big Southwest cities such as Dallas, Oklahoma City Colorado Springs, Tucson, or Phoenix.

Space-time distribution

Another way of looking at the data is to review how the V cases moved in time through space. Figure 4 plots all VI case as a function of longitude, latitude, and time (date/hour). Th x-y axis of Figure 4 represents the latitude and longitude; th z-axis or vertical axis represents time. Cases are include from November 2 to 11, the height of the wave. The cente of the x-y plane corresponds to the coordinates for Level land. All the points are connected with a line to represen movement in time. This line does not assume that all dat points were caused by the same object or stimulus.

Figure 4 shows that from November 2 through No vember 5, there was a general movement of the reporte VI phenomenon to the Southwest from the panhandle o Texas. This trend ended in November 5 with 3 exceptions two movements to the southeast and one movement to th northwest. There was a case reported in San Antonio o November 5 (9:30 p.m.), one in Houston on November

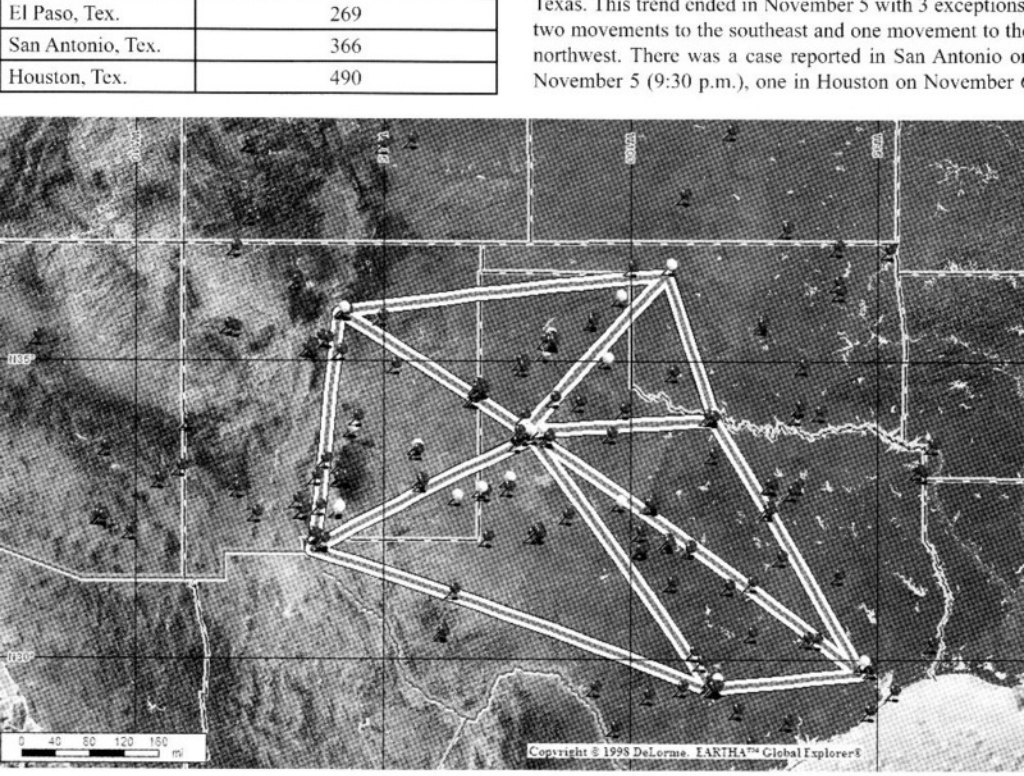

Fig. 3. Map of the U.S. Southwest connecting the Levelland VI hub to six other towns where VI cases were reported.

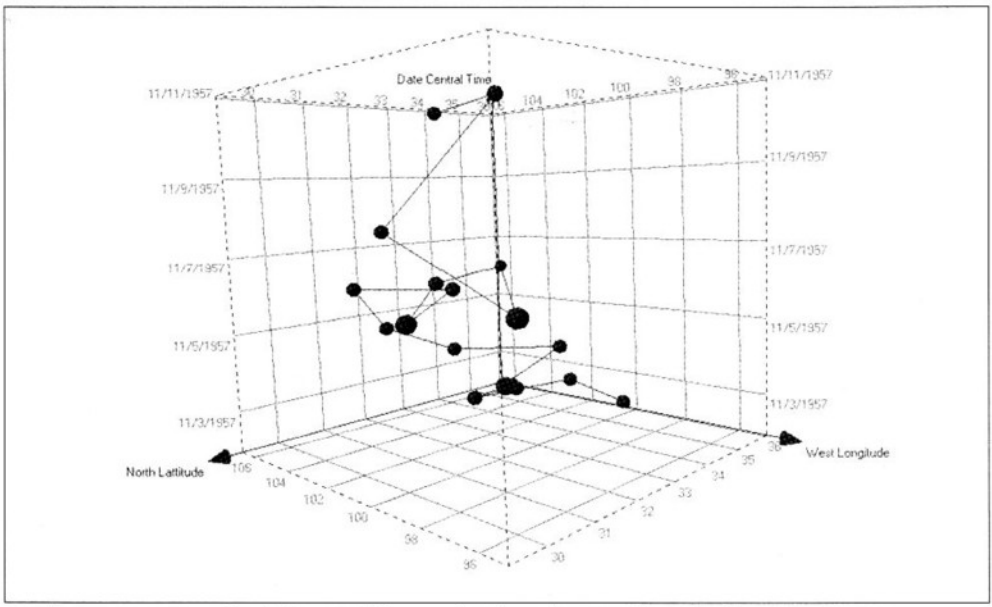

Fig. 4. Reported VI cases plotted as a function of space and time.

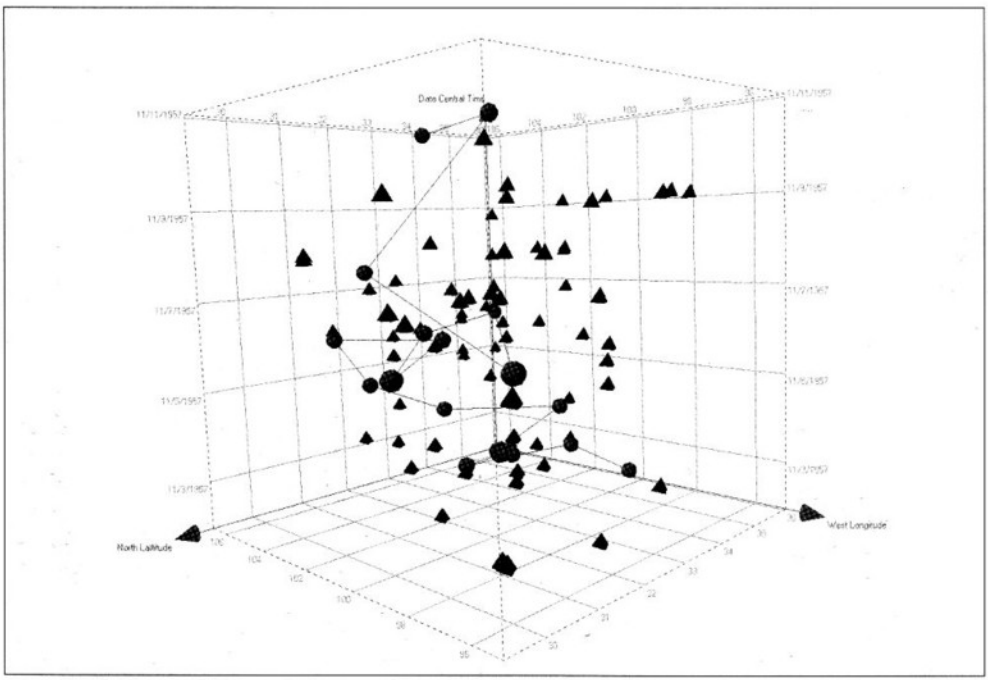

Fig. 5. Reported VI cases (spheres) and non-VI cases (pyramids) plotted as a function of space and time within the hexagon space described in Fig. 2.

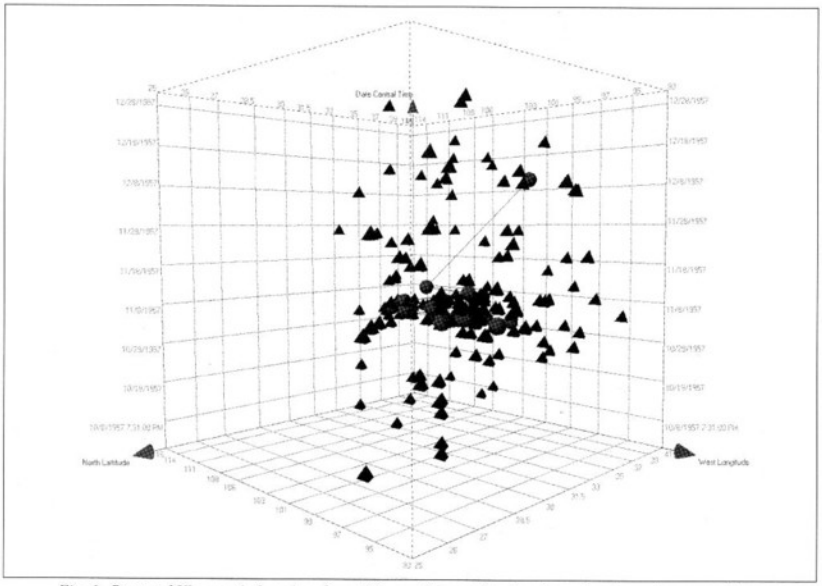

Fig. 6. Reported VI cases (spheres) and non-VI cases (pyramids) plotted as a function of space and time from Oct. 1 through Dec. 31, 1957.

(4:30 a.m.), and one in Santa Fe on November 6 (1:15 a.m.). The southwesterly movement of the VI reports for the first four days of the wave is intriguing. This could be explained by a weather front (that presumably causes anomalous atmospheric phenomena) which moved southwest from the Texas panhandle[4] (I did not check the weather patterns for this region). The southwesterly moving weather front idea, however, suddenly loses credibility when similar reports appear in San Antonio and Houston (unless we explain these away as social contagion).

In Figure 5, all the other non-VI UFO cases are added to this 3D map (whose X-Y coordinates are bounded roughly by the hexagon shown in Figure 3). These non-VI cases represent about 85% of the non-VI cases reported during this time period in the Southwest. Figure 5 shows that most of these non-VI sightings were within the 260-mile radius from Levelland and appear to be distributed equally over a 9-day period.

Figure 6 plots all the UFO cases reported in the Southwest from October 1 through December 31. This plot shows that in October there were few UFO cases reported and these were limited in geographical area. Then on November 2, the explosion of UFO cases took place within nine days and within a limited area (dense cloud in middle of 3D graph). This explosive wave was followed by a decrease in the number of cases and a wider geographical distribution.[5]

Hypotheses for the Southwestern UFO wave

Whatever hypotheses are put forward need to explain the following observations and events.

A sudden jump in UFO reports that involved brilliant oval-shaped balls of light that flew over cars or landed nearby, causing the car's engine and headlights to shut temporarily. Twenty-three of these vehicle interference cases were reported in the Southwest over a period of nine days and within a 500-mile radius of Levelland, Texas. These reports were made during the same period as an explosive wave of non-vehicle interference UFO reports. Both waves peaked about the same time. During the first four days of the VI wave, the reports were moving in a southwesterly direction; then reports jumped southeast, northwest, and finally, northeast. These types of incidents and their magnitude have never been reported before in this region and have not occurred again in 50 years.

Of the 24 VI cases reported, Blue Book evaluated only seven. Blue Book conclusions were that three cases had

unreliable witnesses, one case was imagined, one case was ball lightning, one case was lightning, and one case was a combination of a meteor plus an unreliable witness. Thus, according to Blue Book, the main explanatory hypotheses were ball lightning or unreliable reporting. Presumably, unreliable reporting means that the witnesses either embellished, imagined, or made up their stories as part of a social contagion or craze that started with the Levelland sightings.

For our purposes, however, the explanatory hypotheses can be broadened to include:

- Social contagion
- Ball lightning
- Unknown atmospheric phenomenon
- Intelligently controlled unknown object

Some people attribute the 1957 wave to a social contagion caused by the sudden hysteria in America after the launch of Sputniks I and II. After Sputnik I (the first artificial satellite) was launched on October 4, 1957, suddenly Americans started looking up at the sky and noticing things that they never paid attention to before (Venus, meteors, satellites, stars, etc.). The UFO report histogram in Figure 1, however, shows that after October 4 there was no significant increase in UFO sighting reports in the Southwest (or elsewhere in the United States). Sputnik II (the second artificial satellite that included a dog) was launched on November 3 at 2:30 GMT (November 2 at 8:30 p.m. Central). The news of the Sputnik II launch was not available in the press until after the famous Levelland cases took place (between November 2 at 10:50 p.m. and November 3 at 1:15 a.m. Central). For example, the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal* shared headlines on November 3 between the Levelland UFO sightings and Sputnik II. By November 4, most newspapers in the region were carrying both stories. It is pure coincidence that the Sputnik II launch and the famous Levelland sightings occurred on the same day and close in time. The wide press coverage of the Levelland sightings is sufficient to explain the trigger mechanism for the 1957 wave. The Sputnik II launch could have contributed to renewed interest in watching the night skies and reporting UFOs but it does not add explanatory power to the VI wave.

Social contagion, however, could still explain some of the UFO cases reported to the press. With regard to the flood of nocturnal light reports, it is not unreasonable to expect people to report sightings of Venus, stars, meteors, and other astronomical events as UFOs if they never before paid attention to the night sky. With regard to VI UFO cases, the social contagion can only be invoked if these cases were embellished or made up as part of the hysteria. While this is more difficult to prove, Blue Book concluded it was so in five of its VI cases (all were single-witness cases and 3 happened after the Levelland cases).

One VI case that could be due to social contagion was the Canadian, Texas, case. This report supposedly occurred on November 2, 1957, at 3:30 a.m. (before the Levelland sightings). However, it was not reported until November 4. It was a single-witness case that claimed that a saucer-shaped craft, with a white flag, landed next to the road, and a humanoid was standing next to the UFO. Blue Book concluded that the witness was unreliable.

Nevertheless, it is very doubtful that social contagion could explain all 24 VI cases because:

- Eleven of the VI cases involved multiple witnesses, and
- Some of the VI cases were reported before, during, or right after the key events at Levelland (before the press release).

The ball lightning hypothesis has its own difficulties explaining these VI cases because:

- There is no evidence that ball lightning can stop cars and put out headlights
- Most observers at the time of the incidents did not report lightning or stormy weather.

Moreover, in the latest ball lightning book by one of the field's experts, *Ball Lightning: An Unsolved Problem in Physics* (Stenhoff, p.70), the only case presented that is associated with a car was a 1985 incident in Wales. In this instance a red ball of fire, the size of the front wheel of a tractor, hit the car windshield and shattered it. This incident happened in daylight with no storm present, no thunder, and no lightning. The witness was driving his car when the BL hit it, but at no time did the car engine stop. Also of interest is that despite Blue Book's determination that the incidents at Levelland were ball lightning, those researchers don't list these cases in the ball lightning databases or books.

If, nevertheless, we give ball lightning the benefit of the doubt, it probably could not be the cause for all cases in this wave because the area covered (from Houston to Santa Fe, and from El Paso to Woodward, Oklahoma) was wide and the period covered was long enough (nine days) to include diverse weather conditions.

Another reason why ball lightning researchers do not embrace the CE2 cases from Levelland and its associated wave is that these UFO cases are not homogeneous. Based on my previous research on the seven Levelland VI cases (Rullán, 1999), I found that parameters like shape, size, color, type of motion, duration, and sound were different for all cases. The same observation applies to the additional 17 VI cases from the Southwestern wave. Thus, it is difficult to conclude that the same phenomenon was involved in all the cases. Possible explanations for the heterogeneity of the descriptions could be:

- There were multiple stimuli causing the sightings
- The sightings were caused by a phenomenon whose properties vary (maybe some unknown atmospheric phenomenon)
- The phenomenon that caused the observations was

Table 4: Anomalous observations from the 24 reported VI cases that don't fit the unknown atmospheric phenomena

Anomalous Observation	# of VI Cases Reported
1. Preference of object to hover or fly over dirt roads and paved highways.	24
2. Object departed after the witness got out of the car and approached it (as if intelligent)	3
3. Object emitted machine-like sound (high-pitched whine or whirring or humming)	3
4. Object caused a rush of wind	3
5. Object was blinking on and off like a neon light	2
6. Object appeared to be chasing or targeting car	2
7. Saucer-shaped craft was seen within 200 ft distance	2
8. Object was moving in circles	1
9. Object had its light off in the middle of the road	1
10. Object had red, green, and yellow lights	1
11. Humanoid was seen next to object	1

changing position in time and space and thus leading to totally different descriptions by the witnesses.[6]

The Intelligently Controlled Unknown Object hypothesis is reasonable because of anomalous observations reported in some of the 24 VI cases. Table 4 lists some of these difficult-to-explain observations. Nevertheless, all cases were different and not all cases reported anomalous features. Again, while the overall pattern is similar, when it comes to the detailed description of the VI cases there is a lack of homogeneity.

Conclusion

Given the diverse descriptions of what was observed during this wave, the causes of the VI wave very likely include the presence of a real, unknown phenomenon (which triggered the start of the wave and continued its presence throughout) plus social contagion (which explains not only the large number of non-VI cases but could explain some of the VI cases as well). The unknown phenomenon could be either an unknown atmospheric phenomenon or intelligently controlled unknown objects. Using Ockham's razor, we reject the idea that the explanation could include both. All the anomalous observations listed in Table 4 do not support the unknown atmospheric phenomenon hypothesis and tend to support the intelligently controlled unknown object hypothesis. However, we cannot reject either hypothesis because of the poor data quality and weak evidence in most of the cases.

In the end, each case must stand on its own. Unfortunately, all the evidence from these cases is anecdotal, most of the reports came from newspaper clippings, and few of the cases were investigated properly. While we can conclude that an explosive and mysterious UFO wave did hit the Southwest in November of 1957, we are not closer to knowing what caused it and why. Nevertheless, it is very unlikely that the wave was entirely caused by ball lightning, imagination, or pure social contagion.

Notes

1. UFOCAT shows 455 more cases in 1957 than in 1947 or about a 33% increase.

2. The first VI case reported to Blue Book was in October 31, 1952, in Fayetteville, Georgia, where a blimp-shaped object hovered over a car and killed its radio. The case was classified as unknown by Blue Book.

3. Rodeghier's VI database shows 19 cases from Oct. 1 through Dec. 31, 1957, reported in non-Southwestern states: Indiana (2), Wyoming, North Carolina, Illinois (2), Alaska, California, Nebraska, Alabama, Ohio, New York (2), Louisiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, Nevada, Washington (2).

4. In a paper that Dr. James E. McDonald wrote in 1967 for the American Society of Newspaper Editors, he summarized his findings on the weather conditions in Levelland at the time of the sightings. McDonald writes: "I dug out the weather maps and rainfall data. A large, high-pressure area was moving southward over the Texas panhandle, completely antithetical to convective activity and lightning of any sort." Moreover, the *Lubbock Morning Avalanche* newspaper wrote that, "a thin cold front eased into the South Plains early Sunday morning (Nov. 3), sliding under warm air masses to trigger steady falling, general rains over West Texas."

5. The lone VI case that took place in December 8, 1957, was the only Southwestern VI case that did not occur within the 9 days of the explosive wave. This case occurred in Woodward, Oklahoma, and was not reported to the media. The witness wrote a letter to J. Allen Hynek (date unknown) describing the event and Hynek corresponded with the witness. This is a high-strangeness case that includes a close encounter with a domed flying saucer in addition to the typical VI features. The case file was obtained from CUFOS. Hynek wrote about this case in the article titled "The UFO Gap," published in *Playboy* 14, no. 12 (December 1967).

(continued on page 22)

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6. Two VI cases that include heterogeneous descriptions for the same object are the Betty and Barney Hill case of 1961 and the Woodward, Oklahoma, case of Dec. 8, 1957. The recent book on the Hill case (Friedman, 2007) documents the descriptions that the Hills gave of the same UFO while they were fully conscious. The UFO description changed over time from a star-like object, to a flash of light, to saucer-shaped craft and finally to an orange ball of fire on the road. Likewise, in the Woodward case, the eyewitness first saw a tremendous bright light that flew by. This light then became a saucer-shaped craft.

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