

On May 29, the president's chief of staff, Maddix Young, entered the Oval Office, interrupting a meeting between President Hallstrom and the leaders of France and England. The group was sitting on the couches in the center of the room.

Young didn't burst into the office, or even move fast, but everyone looked up and knew that something important had happened.

The chief of staff looked down respectfully as he strode over to the group. He put his hands on the back of the couch, leaned over, and whispered into the president's ear.

The president replied simply, "They'll stay," and Young turned and left. Hallstrom leaned forward, put his elbows on his knees, put his hands together, and rested his chin in the crook between the index fingers and the thumbs. All waited for a full minute as the president thought. Finally, he sat back up.

"Well Gentlemen, it seems we have a new development. I've been informed that an object, moving very fast, has approached the earth, and is traveling along its surface."

"You mean some kind of asteroid?" asked England's prime minister.

"No, apparently it's something that is under intelligent control. That's all I know right now. Seth McGraw my science adviser and Bogart Wake are on their way to fill us in."

"Would you like us to leave?"

"No, I'll ask that you stay--this information concerns us all."

Right on cue, McGraw and Wake were ushered in by the president's secretary; the two were so engrossed in their conversation, they seemed unaware of their surroundings.

After quick introductions with handshakes all around, the president said, "OK, Bogart, what have we got?"

"This is Seth's area, I'll let him fill you in."

"Right," said McGraw, "This is what we've got." McGraw ran his fingers through his thinning hair, not from nervousness, but from excitement. He'd normally be ill-at-ease in a situation like this, but his inner child was jumping up and down with glee.

"Two hours ago, an object traveling 15,000 miles per hour intersected Earth's atmosphere at the North Pole. It was traveling along a vector normal to the ecliptic ..."

"Ah, Seth ..." said Wake.

"Right," McGraw looked at Wake, then back at the president, and took a breath to slow himself down. "The planets in our solar system travel around the sun in pretty much one plane. It's as if the sun were at the center of a phonograph record, and all the planets revolve around it on the surface of the record. 'Normal to the ecliptic' means that the object came in from above the record, perpendicular to lines on the record's surface." He looked around and saw that everyone understood.

"When the object reached our planet ..."

At this point, the president, with a small grin, raised his index finger and said, "Watch this ... five, four, three, two ..." Before he got to "one" the door to the oval office opened, and the top three secret service agents came in. They also didn't actually "burst" in, but it was about as close to "bursting" that one could get and still be respectful. The president nodded with an "I told you so" grin.

"Mr. President, we need to move you to a secure location." This from Stanley Mann, the director of the secret service.

"I was expecting that. Where to?"

"Marine One to the Doomsday Plane to Cheyenne Mountain."

"Okay. Maddix," chief of staff Maddix Young was at the door to the office, with one hand on the doorknob and the other on the jamb. "Put together a list of people we need with us on this trip ..." he looked at Mann with a raised eyebrow.

"Seating for 32."

"... up to 32, but I doubt we need that many. Then another list of people who should follow in the next day or two. For this trip, I want you, Maddix, and Seth, Bogart, and Bernie. What's the status on Jake Corby?" This last question was directed at Bogart.

"We're working on him."

"No more of that, I want him there. Get him a piano if necessary, Maddix."

At this point, the group was moving down the hall, and Marine One was landing on the South Lawn. The president said his goodbyes to the visiting leaders, knowing that they couldn't accept an invitation to the Cheyenne Mountain bunker.

"Okay, Seth, continue."

"The object reached Earth at the North Pole. Since it came in normal to the plane of the solar system, our meager asteroid detection systems had no clue it was coming."

The president interrupted, "Is the plane of the solar system parallel to that of the galaxy, suggesting it came from outside the Milky Way?"

Seth and Bogart exchanged looks, clearly impressed with the question. And it was a valid query, not just something designed to demonstrate the president's knowledge.

"No," said Seth, "The plane of our solar system is angled at somewhere between 60 and 90 degrees to that of the galaxy, with the South Pole pointed towards the Milky Way's center."

"So, when the object reached the North Pole, it was traveling at Mach 20, though we suspect that it had been going much faster. It made an impossibly quick turn, and is now traveling at a constant altitude of 40,000 feet. Its course is a spiral, with each arm of the spiral 150 miles apart. It's made eight spiral laps so far. If it continues this pattern, at least one pass will be visible from each point on the earth, and it will arrive at the South Pole in four days, after traveling a total of 1.3 million miles."

"This path, of course, rules out any type of natural phenomenon."

"What do you think is going on, Seth?"

"Speculation: It's a spacecraft, manned or unmanned, from an alien civilization. We're confident about the alien civilization part. It's already displayed capabilities far beyond anything we have."

"As to what it's doing, there are four theories. The first is that it's performing a flyby. That is, it's saying 'Look at me, look at how advanced I am.' As mentioned, depending on the weather, every inhabitant of the earth will have a chance to see it pass."

"So you think it's showing off?"

"Maybe. Showing off or saying hello. Second theory: it's on a sightseeing trip. Not so likely, since most of its journey will be over uninhabited oceans. If you go to see France, you don't plot a regular path that takes you over every inch of the country."

"The third hypothesis is that it's doing a survey--mapping out the planet. But that's something that could be done more easily from orbit."

"The fourth, and most ominous theory, is that it's a crop-duster. It's laying down some substance, likely harmful. We're working on distinguishing these four possibilities, but unfortunately, the last seems the most reasonable."

"OK, worst case, it's some kind of poison gas and we're pests that are being

exterminated--what do we do about it?"

Seth pointed to Bogart Wake, and dropped the hammer on his finger pistol. Wake took up the briefing.

"Assuming the worst, we need to either stop this craft, or protect ourselves. The air at Cheyenne Mountain is heavily filtered and likely safe. We should consider moving more of the government there."

President Hallstrom looked at chief-of-staff Young, who nodded and made notes.

Bogart continued, "We'll look into Greenbriar and other facilities with controlled air, but of course it's a bit like the doctor who tells you that the X-rays aren't dangerous, then jumps behind a lead shield. The general public will be unprotected. We can tell them to go indoors and close their windows, but that's pretty lame. "

"How long until the craft reaches American airspace?"

McGraw consulted his tablet. "Fourteen hours to the top of Alaska, and 28 to the continental US."

"Whoa. Fast moving crisis, huh, guys? I assume General Clayton would like to speak with me?" At this point, the group was in Marine One, which had already cleared the ground on the way to Andrews Air Force Base.

Young replied, "She is on line two on the handset by your elbow." Megan Clayton was the chief of staff of the Air Force.

The president picked up the phone, and asked the tech officer to put the call on speaker phone. "General Clayton, sorry to keep you waiting, you're on speaker phone, what have we got?"

"No good news, sir. This thing is traveling way too fast for us. Our F15s can't go faster than Mach 3, and this thing is going Mach 20. My science guys don't even know how that's possible. We've set up interception courses, but even if you decided to shoot it down, I doubt that could happen."

"What's the probability that we could stop it?"

"Slim to none, sir. It would be like trying to shoot down a fighter jet with a bow and arrow. We'd pretty much have to set off a nuclear explosion right in front of it. I should mention that we've tried hailing it with every means we have, but have gotten no response."

"OK, thank you general. Keep working on the options, but for now, the rules of engagement are to stay out of its way. Don't do anything remotely threatening. My first impulse is treat it as friendly, if only because we have no other realistic option. Does that sound reasonable from a military point of view?"

"Yes sir, that's the conclusion we've come to at the Joint Chiefs meeting."

"OK, thank you." The president hung up and addressed the group.

"Act friendly since we have no other realistic option. Opinions?"

"Just to take the devil's advocate position," said Wake, "What would we do if we knew that the craft was spraying a deadly gas that would kill every creature on the planet?"

"We would set off nuclear bombs right in front of it along its path, and keep doing so until we ran out of bombs, but I can't nuke up most of Canada on the chance ..."

"Unless we did it over the ocean."

"Agreed. I appreciate the brainstorming, but until we know for sure that it's hostile, let's act like primitive, welcoming natives."

They soon arrived at Andrews Air Force Base, landing right next to the so-called

Doomsday Plane.

This Plane, also known as the advanced airborne command post, was one of four Boeing 747s that had been specially modified to be resistant to attack and packed with communications gear which included a five-mile antenna that could be wound out behind the plane to allow communication with the nation's nuclear subs.

"Maddix, a conference call with the other G8 leaders?"

"It's already being organized, Mr. President. It should happen in about an hour." And with that, the group moved up the stairs and into the Doomsday Plane.

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While the object continued its four-day spiral journey, the world speculated as to what would happen when it reached the South Pole. Most expected it to continue off into space. That's not what happened.

When it reached the South Pole, it made its second impossibly abrupt turn, and zipped up the 74th longitude line to New York City. It started a gradual descent as it passed Venezuela, and stopped inches from the top of the Empire State Building. It went from Mach 10 to zero in less than a second.

For the first time, the craft revealed itself to be a perfect sphere with a surprising resemblance to the "Spaceship Earth" monument at Florida's Epcot theme park, right down to the textured surface. Twice as wide as the building it cozied up to, it glowed with shifting purple and blue hues.

The New Yorkers craning their necks below noticed an unmistakable, bleach-like ozone smell for the first hours after the craft arrived. Most tourists on the Empire State Building's observation deck evacuated in a panic, but those who remained saw that the separation between the building's antenna and the craft was maintained precisely. They could hear a soft flying-saucer noise--the same noise heard during the sphere's flight, and the same throbbing woo-woo used in old science fiction movies.

After arrival, nothing happened. The craft just sat there. News trucks assembled in the streets below, and the media scrambled to assemble experts to give their opinions about what was happening.

Of course, the news organizations had a significant problem: There were no experts. No experts on inexplicable spacecraft doing impossible things. No experts on things that had never happened before. They interviewed NASA people and John Nance, former pilot and author of novels about flying. They wanted to interview Captain Sully Sullenberger, but he refused, explaining that landing a plane in the Hudson river wasn't anything like an interstellar object flying at Mach 20.

The best they could do was bring on scientists who had been involved with SETI.

On CNN, Anderson Cooper appeared on the left side of a split screen. "Today we are talking with Seth McGraw, President Hallstrom's chief science advisor, and the former CEO of the SETI Institute. 'SETI' stands for the search for extraterrestrial intelligence,' and the institute was founded in 1984 as a nonprofit organization. It employs over 120 scientists, and its mission is to 'to explore, understand and explain the origin, nature and prevalence of life in the universe.' Dr. McGraw is speaking to us from the Cheyenne Mountain bunker, where he is working closely with the president.

"Thank you for talking with us today, Dr. McGraw."

"Happy to be here." If Cooper was thinking "Yes, you're probably happy to be a

gazillion feet underground, with filtered air," he didn't show it.

"Dr. McGraw, what's inside that sphere?"

"We don't know, of course, but there are two possibilities that I can think of. First, it's totally mechanical--that is, it's a drone, with no biological beings inside it. NASA discovered long ago that it's a lot easier and cheaper to send a mechanical device to another planet than it is to send people. So, this sphere could be analogous to one of our Mars rover missions.

"There are few creatures on Earth that could survive the kinds of decelerations that we've observed. But of course, if there is a biological being in there, it will be unlike any creature on Earth.

"In addition, since we know the craft is far more advanced than anything humans have created, perhaps it has properties that eliminate the G forces that we'd expect. My scientists tell me that's impossible, but thirty years ago they might have thought noise-canceling headphones impossible.

"The second possibility is that there are one or more sentient beings inside that sphere. It's entirely possible, but I see it as the less likely alternative."

"Dr. McGraw, you said that a creature would be unlike any creature on Earth. What would it look like?"

"Well, this is a good opportunity to clear up a common misconception about what extraterrestrials might look like. Most people picture aliens as misshapen humans, but they are unlikely to look like us. Think about it. On this planet we have billions of species of animals. Many of these share a common ancestry, and many have evolved under similar conditions, yet look around at the diversity of form that we see on this planet. Compare the form of a whale with that of a spider, and you can imagine the diversity you might expect between a human and an extraterrestrial.

"So, throw out any notions of creatures that are just like humans, but with weird eyes or huge heads. Realize that the nature of the aliens in science fiction movies and TV shows is dictated more by the special effects budget than by any scientific considerations. That is, it's a lot cheaper to put a guy in a green monkey suit than it is to have a live-action, life-sized centipede.

"Having said that, there are certainly advantages to some forms as opposed to others. Image-forming eyes, for example, have evolved independently several times. So expect aliens to have eyes. Also, the creatures are likely to have a way of finely manipulating the environment as we can do with our hands. A good analogy is the octopus. An octopus has eyes that resemble ours, and it can manipulate the environment with its tentacles. We might expect that an alien would resemble us to the same degree ..."

At this point Anderson Cooper put his finger to his earpiece in the international "I'm getting a signal" gesture, and said "Dr. McGraw I'm going to have to interrupt you here, because apparently something is happening. We have a television signal being broadcast from the sphere itself."

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When Anderson Cooper indicated that a signal was coming from the sphere, everyone in the club was glued to our new 60 inch widescreen TV. I'd been adamant about not allowing TVs in the club, but with the recent news events, I'd finally given in. I had the set hidden in a custom cabinet so that customers wouldn't ask Stephanie to put on the 49er playoffs, for example. We'd open it up only for major news stories.

Well, news stories don't get any more major than this. The CNN broadcast cut to an old test pattern--the one with the Indian chief on it. That told me that we weren't in Kansas anymore, since there's no way CNN would use that image. There's nothing politically incorrect about it that I can think of, but I'm sure CNN wouldn't want to take any chances.

I knew that it was show time. Time to make our first contact with an extraterrestrial species. Stephanie and I and the six patrons in the club sat close to the TV, and pretty much held our breaths.

The test pattern faded and was replaced by the set of *The View*. That's right, the ABC talk show set featuring the distinctive round-on-the-bottom desk. Sitting dead center behind the desk was Barbara Walters. But two things were different.

First, this was a younger version of Barbara Walters. This person, or illusion on the screen, or whatever, was about 70 years old. It wasn't the current Barbara Walters, who, if she is alive today, would be, what, 90 years old? This was a living, breathing, younger Barbara Walters. As incomprehensible as that was, the second difference was just as mind-blowing. OK, more mind-blowing.

Barbara Walters was naked. Not a stitch of clothing on except for a baseball cap that read "Ask me about my grandchildren." Now, Ms. Walters was an attractive woman, and kept herself in shape, but let's face it, she was 70 years old. It wasn't a pretty sight, and I noticed one of our customers holding up his hand so that he could see the former news anchor only from the neck up.

Every person in the room had the same WTF? Look on their face, with their mouths open.

Walters looked up in her slow, characteristic way and spoke with her unique voice. Here's her speech, be sure to hear her voice in your head as you read it.

"Greetings people of Earth.

"I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I am here. I am here to help you. Think of me as Glinda, the good witch in *The Wizard of Oz* movie. But I have to tell you people, this witch of the ..." and here she consulted her notes, "North, wasn't really that good, right? I mean, if she wanted to help Dorothy, she would have said, 'Look girlfriend, this is all a goddamned dream, 'cause you got knocked on the head during a tornado, so you best just wake the fuck up!'" These last four words were yelled.

"Instead, Glinda puts the red shoes on Dorothy, making her a target of the bad witch, then sends Dorothy on this wild goose chase to find a wizard who isn't a wizard, and even at the end of the movie, when Dorothy finally wakes up, nothing is resolved, right? The mean lady down the road is still going to put the little black dog to sleep.

"So, people, I'm concerned that you humans just don't, fucking, pay, attention." Here she stopped and looked into the camera for 10 seconds. Remember, she's buck naked.

"Let me give you another example. You've got, what," again checking her notes, "Seven billion people on this planet? What the hell were you thinking? I know what you were thinking," and here her voice changed to that of a California valley girl, "It would be so awesome, you know, to, like, have a cute little boy or girl to sit on my lap when I, like, watch TV." Back to the Barbara Walters voice. "So now you have seven billion people on a planet that should have a maximum of," checks the notes, "2.1 million people.

I'm not going to lead you on a wild goose chase. I'm telling you now, 'Wake the fuck up!'" Another ten-second pause while she looked directly at the camera."

"OK, so here is the bad news: The Wicked Witch of the West is coming. Of course I don't mean the actual witch of the West, since she's just a character in a book slash movie," and here Walters made a slashing movement with her hand, "I'm just using her as an analogy so you will understand. Got it?"

"Here are some other analogies for you: The Borg, Attila the Hun, the Roman Empire. Got it?"

"In other words, the Bad Guys are coming. The Bad Guys are a civilization of warlike beings that do bad things to unprotected planets like yours. For right now, let me just say 'You don't want to know.'

"My Mission Impossible is to travel around helping underdogs like you. In this case, I have to say 'Mission Totally Impossible,' but I'm going to give it my best shot.

"This is all for now. I have to let you folks process this," and she said the word "process" in a mocking way, and made little bunny rabbit quote marks with her fingers, "but I'll be back," spoken with a perfect Arnold Schwarzenegger accent, "to help. I've downloaded some plans for devices that could be of assistance. You'll find them on wikileaks.org."

At this point, to the growing horror of many viewers, she stood up and walked slowly around the desk. I won't describe it in detail, but will tell you that the curtains didn't match the drapes.

"And one more thing," She then stopped in front of the desk, planted her feet firmly, threw her arms out and up and said,

"Live from New York, It's Saturday Niiiiiiii-ght!"

The screen cut to black, and the sphere shot off into space.

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