

The secret life of Donald H. Menzel

by Stanton T. Friedman

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Donald Menzel was well-known in ufological circles from the early 1950s on as a total skeptic. He authored or co-authored three debunking books and made frequent public statements asserting that all UFO sightings could be explained. How could he possibly have been a member of a group that was fully aware of the crash of a flying saucer outside Roswell, New Mexico, in July 1947, another crash near the Texas-Mexico border in December 1950, and the recovery within two miles at the Roswell crash site of four alien bodies? How could a Harvard professor of astronomy be part of a high-level military and intelligence cover-up?

The MJ-12 document, which makes these fantastic allegations, arrived in December 1984 at the North Hollywood home of TV producer Jaime Shandera in the form of a roll of 35mm film in a double-wrapped envelope with no return address. The 8x10 prints made from the negatives were clean and showed what purported to be a TOP SECRET briefing document prepared for President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower. The date of the preparation of the briefing was November 18, 1952. The preparer was Adm. Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter (MJ-1), the first head of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Also on the list besides Menzel were Air Force Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg and Adm. Sidney Souers, the first two directors of the Central Intelligence Group which in 1947 became the CIA. MJ-12 member Gen. Nathan Twining was in 1952, at the time of the supposed briefing, the Vice Chief of Staff of the USAF under Vandenberg and had been head of the Air Materiel Command at Wright Field in July 1947. Army Gen. Robert M. Montague was named head of a secret project at Sandia Base near Albuquerque, New Mexico, in July 1947 after being Commander of Fort Bliss, near El Paso, Texas, which included White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. Gordon Gray had been involved in a review of intelligence operations and was assistant Secretary of the Army and later on the 5412 Committee (Covert Operations) of the NSC. Dr. Jerome Hunsaker had been chairman of the National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics (NACA) and was a real expert on aeronautics at MIT. Dr. Detlev Bronk was an aviation physiologist, president of Johns Hopkins University (1953-1968) and

head of the National Academy of Sciences and National Research Council. He served on numerous government committees.

Dr. Vannevar Bush was wartime technology czar as head of the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD) which set up the major projects such as the atomic bomb. After the war he headed the Joint Research and Development Board (JRDB) and was on the War Council and President of the Carnegie Institution in Washington, D.C. A top secret 1950 Canadian memo had already identified him as being involved in UFO-related work. His assistant at the Carnegie Institution was another member of the supposed MJ-12 group, Dr. Lloyd Berkner, an outstanding scientist in a number of areas. A natural for the group was James V. Forrestal, the first Secretary of Defense. According to the document, Forrestal, who died in May 1949, was succeeded in August 1950 by Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, who in 1950 was appointed head of the CIA to succeed Hillenkoetter. All the names made sense except Menzel, even though he is mentioned in the text as pushing for an interstellar origin rather than an interplanetary source such as Mars.

Menzel's role in the UFO controversy had always puzzled me. Here was a famous Harvard astronomer whose reasoning about UFO sightings could be picked to pieces by a college freshman physics major. Over and over again he adjusted the facts to match his explanation, rather than deriving his explanations from the facts at hand. His first book in 1953 was translated into Russian and kept almost a whole generation of scientists in both the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. from even nibbling at the UFO phenomenon, especially since it was favorably reviewed by Dr. J. Allen Hynek, another astronomer and the Project Blue Book consultant on UFOs for 20 years.

Menzel even participated in Congressional hearings on UFOs held on July 29, 1968, and in a meeting session on UFOs sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Boston in December 1969. His last book (co-authored with psychiatrist and science-fiction writer Ernest Taves, published after Menzel's death in 1976) continued to focus on identified flying objects and misrepresented the facts in several cases.

Besides being puzzled at how such an important astrophysicist could be such a lousy ufologist, I was also mystified by the fact that I found proof in the Air Force files that Menzel had a copy of the largest study of UFOs ever done for the government, *Project Blue Book Special Report 14*, but didn't even mention it in his three books. It covered over 3000

sightings of which more than 600 could *not* be identified by the professional investigators. There were quality evaluations, cross comparisons between unknowns and knowns, and more than 240 charts, tables, and graphs. Why didn't he mention it?

In checking my files on Vannevar Bush after hearing of the briefing document from Shandera and Bill Moore I found a letter to Bush from Robert Proctor, a lawyer for the old and established Boston legal firm of Choate, Hall, and Stewart. It states:

Dear Dr. Bush:

I am happy to inform you that the air force central loyalty security board has under date of January 11, 1951 advised Dr. Donald H. Menzel and myself of Dr. Menzel's complete clearance with respect to loyalty and security charges brought against him by the U.S. Air Force. The letter of the executive secretary of the board advising him of this determination contains the following paragraph:

"I am pleased to inform you that the board determined that on all the evidence reasonable grounds do not exist for the belief that you are disloyal to the Government of the United States and that reasonable grounds do not exist for the belief that your immediate removal would be warranted by the demands of national security. This decision has been approved by the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Management)."

I know that you will be hearing directly from Donald Menzel, but I am, in accordance with my commitment to you, advising you immediately of this result because of your great interest in the matter. In doing so, I want to express personally my very sincere appreciation of the all out help which you provided in presentation of his case.

Sincerely yours,
Robert Proctor

Suddenly, this letter raised a whole host of questions about Menzel. Why was he in danger of losing an Air Force security clearance in the first place? I knew he had been in the Navy during World War II. What connection was there between Bush and Menzel? Why was it important to Bush that Menzel had been cleared of any loyalty difficulties? There was no mention of the loyalty hearings in the *New York Times* though several other McCarthy-era hearings were noted. Freedom of Information requests to various government agencies and the National Archives brought no information. I contacted the law firm and found that there had been more than a full week of hearings in May 1950, that there were over 1,300 pages of testimony, and that one of Menzel's staunchest defenders had been Vannevar Bush! I then determined that in addition to the huge correspondence about UFOs by Menzel at the American Philosophical Society Library in Philadelphia, there were also substantial holdings of his papers at the University of Denver where he had done his undergraduate work, and, not surprisingly, at the Harvard University Archives. The Denver papers had become open for researchers only after his death in 1976.

Access to his papers at Harvard required permission from both the chairman of the astronomy department and the director of the Smithsonian Observatory. It was also necessary to obtain Mrs. Menzel's permission to read his unpublished autobiography at Harvard. Finders Guides were supplied by the University of Denver and Harvard, and a listing of their file

folders by the APS Library. Eventually, permission was obtained from the two Harvard people and, during my visit to the Harvard Archives in April 1986, from Mrs. Menzel, who was most charming and cooperative when I visited her in the company of two people connected with Harvard. I must admit that my focus to her was on the loyalty hearings and the major benefit to the country made by scientists in the postwar era, not on flying saucers.

The Finders Guide at Harvard gave no indication of any smoking guns about UFOs or even about Menzel. There was no copy machine in the facility, unlike at the Library of Congress Manuscript Division where a great deal of useful material had been scanned in the past, including some of the papers of Twining, Vandenberg, Bush, Curtis LeMay, Dr. Merle Tuve (close associate of Bush and Berkner) and others. As at all archives, one lists the boxes one wants, goes through them folder by folder, returns them, and requests more, making notes with pencils only and with no paper of mine being brought in. I dictated notes because I could afford to spend only three days at the Library, being scheduled to review James Forrestal's papers at Princeton for the rest of the week. The Fund for UFO Research had agreed to pay the travel expenses for my research project. Thanks to Joan Thompson, who worked in the Harvard astronomy department and has a long-time interest in UFOs, I was able to talk with a number of people in the department.

Starting with his correspondence with President Jack Kennedy, my findings took me completely by surprise. It is clear that Donald Menzel led two lives. The public one was as a famous astronomy professor serving on international committees, leading eclipse expeditions, establishing solar observatories, supervising graduate students, and debunking UFOs. The second life involved consulting work for federal intelligence agencies with primary focus on the National Security Act (NSA) and for more than 30 industrial companies which were following up on the skills developed during World War II concerning radio wave propagation and cryptography and — if we are to believe the MJ-12 document — on interstellar alien craft.

Here are some of the reasons Menzel belonged with the other 11 military and scientific high-security-level members of Majestic-12:

(1) In 1960, Menzel stated in letters to Jack Kennedy that he knew more about and had a longer continuous association with the large and highly classified NSA and its predecessor Navy agency than anyone else in the country. It is now known that the NSA had a UFO connection. It has refused to release 160 UFO documents or even an unexpurgated version of a 21-page TOP SECRET affidavit to a federal judge justifying the withholding of the 160 documents. The version released is about 80-percent expurgated.

(2) Menzel stated to Kennedy that he had had a Navy TOP

SECRET ULTRA security clearance, even at the same time that the USAF was trying to withdraw his much lower level Secret clearance (autobiography and letter).

(3) Menzel had a long association with Dr. Bush dating back to at least 1934, according to both Bush and Menzel. Bush at that time was dean at MIT and working on one of the first analog computers. Menzel was interested in this system for certain astronomical calculations. It is clear from Bush's testimony that Bush had contact with Menzel during the war when he was serving in Washington on various projects and that that association continued after the war, although Bush is careful in his testimony not to get into classified detail since his testimony was unclassified.

(4) Menzel was known for his outstanding discretion with regard to classified material. Many of the people who testified on his behalf at the loyalty hearings, including Dr. Bush, stressed his total trustworthiness with regard to adherence to proper security provisions. I have talked with numerous others who knew Menzel in one way or another, including two different people who worked for him during the war on classified projects. There was unanimous agreement that he was extraordinarily discreet. A close associate of his, who had been his Ph.D. adviser at Princeton, stressed that Menzel never mentioned classified work. Many others stressed that he simply did not mix the unclassified world and the classified world.

(5) Menzel would have been well aware of disinformation as a standard technique used by governments as appropriate. He was aware, for example, of the breaking of the German and Japanese codes during the war. This was of great importance for the Allied victory in that war. He knew that false information often had to be put out to protect various groups.

(6) Menzel had learned Japanese during his work in cryptography. He had even taught cryptography before the war and continued as head of Communications Unit #1 of the U.S. Naval Reserve in Cambridge after being mustered out. He would have been an ideal person to show the symbols found at Roswell, since he already had the high-level security clearance to go with his cryptographic skills and an understanding of an entirely different symbolic language.

(7) According to his notebook listing his travel expenditures, he made quite frequent trips to Washington, D.C., and New Mexico in the 1947-1949 time frame on government business. The cover story for New Mexico was the establishment of the Air Force-sponsored Sacramento Peak Observatory, which interestingly is not far from Roswell and White Sands.

(8) He considered physicist Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, Los Alamos Manhattan Project Director, a "close friend" and also was well acquainted with Detlev Bronk and Lloyd Berkner, other members of MJ-12, as well as most of the top scientists of the 1950s.

(9) In his autobiography Menzel noted that he had done work for the CIA and wrote a TOP SECRET document about the NSA which had reached Ike and, he hoped, done some good. He also noted that when much younger he had written

articles for numerous major newspapers and also written science fiction.

In short, then, we can say that Menzel was the best suited of all 12 to provide disinformation to the general public. He had written science fiction; he had written popular newspaper articles; he had written materials which showed a great interest in popularization of science. That his UFO efforts were disinformation is fairly clear if one carefully reviews criticisms of his UFO investigations by me; by Brad Sparks, a West Coast researcher who did a devastating critique; by the late Dr. James McDonald (professor of physics) in his Congressional testimony and elsewhere; and most recently by Dr. Bruce Macabee, who has pointed out that when one carefully examines the data used by Menzel to justify certain conclusions about specific UFO cases, one finds that they don't stand up.

In case one wonders why Menzel was writing Jack Kennedy in the first place, it should be noted that Kennedy was on the Board of Overseers at Harvard. He had chosen astronomy as the area that he wanted to get involved with. Menzel clearly was impressed with Kennedy. Florence Menzel described him as a great admirer of Jack Kennedy and he even noted in one place in his files that Kennedy, unlike most of the other people who were on the Board of Overseers, did his own reports rather than asking Menzel to do them for him.

As an indication of Menzel's discretion, it is obvious that he could have saved himself a great deal of grief at the Air Force loyalty hearings by stating that he had a Navy TOP SECRET ULTRA clearance. And yet he didn't do so. This despite the fact that he described the whole loyalty business as the worst experience of his life. Part of the difficulty, incidentally, was that although the hearings were held in May 1950 and a decision was supposed to be reached within a few months, it wasn't until January 1951 that word was released (as noted in the letter above to Bush from Proctor). During that whole period of time, of course, Menzel was living in uncertainty.

Here are a couple of quotes from letters to Kennedy as examples of discretion. Speaking of the NSA in an August 13, 1960, letter:

I have been associated with this activity for almost 30 years and probably have the longest continuous record of association of any person in the country. I still keep my close association with them. Properly cleared to one another, I should be able to help in this sensitive area.

November 3, 1960, again about the NSA:

I have been a consultant to that activity with TOP SECRET clearance and have also had some association with the CIA. Obviously in an unclassified letter, I cannot go further into detail.

That Menzel was frank in his comments to Kennedy is clear from a letter of December 27, 1960:

May I suggest one word of caution in strictest confidence. Many of the scientists have some concerns of the strong influence exerted by Dr. Bronk in the space area. As president of the National Academy of Sciences, he is a powerful man. Somehow or other, he manages to get on almost every committee of importance. I have served on a number of these with him and have not been impressed either with his breadth of vision or his depth. He will undoubtedly urge you to put a great deal of power in his hands. I simply urge caution....A good many of us who wish to move forward in the field of space research would like to see someone other than Hugh Dryden as the executive director of NASA. Dryden simply does not have the vision to hold down this post.

A very important aspect of Menzel's professional capabilities was his engineering approach to things. He was not concerned strictly with theory at all. Even in his wartime efforts, he dealt with practical problems. There was a running battle between him and Harlow Shapley, technically his boss at Harvard, about the need for engineering work just for the design of an observatory in South Africa. Menzel was upset that Shapley did a slap-dash job and that the telescope was never so useful as it might have been if the proper engineering work had been done. In addition, Menzel makes clear in his autobiography that he did consulting work, apparently most of it highly classified, for more than 30 large companies. Some of this work was an extension of his wartime work on radio propagation for Collins Radio. He was heavily involved in the Geophysical Corporation; he worked for Lockheed, for McDonnell Douglas, and many other companies and was often offered industrial jobs on a full-time basis. Instead he kept on as a consultant. He even noted that his income during retirement from the stock in the Geophysical Corporation of America, which he served as kind of a part time technical director, was greater than his combined pensions from the Smithsonian and Harvard.

So we have a man who is ready, willing and able to get his hands dirty with equipment, with technology. Parenthetically, Dr. J. Allen Hynek was nonengineering-oriented in almost all of his work. It is interesting that, according to the MJ-12 document, Menzel pushed for an origin outside our solar system. Hynek, throughout his career, refused to do any kind of background research on the engineering aspects of interstellar flight, thus destroying some of his own credibility by using the analogy that if the thickness of one playing card represents the distance from the earth to the moon, the distance to the nearest star is represented by 19 miles of playing cards and therefore obviously it was impossible to get there. This is an example of linear thinking which is totally wrong where interstellar flight is concerned. The hard part is getting off the earth because of the local gravitational field.

Since it was clear from his comments to Kennedy that Menzel had the facilities for storing, preparing, shipping and receiving classified documents, I made a serious effort to find out who did his classified work for him in the late '40s and '50s. I eventually, after considerable effort, found a woman who had been a graduate student in one of the cryptography

courses, worked for him in Washington during the war as a kind of secretary and assistant, went back to Harvard with him, worked for him there, and wound up marrying one of his graduate students. He was like a father to her. As a matter of fact, her marriage took place in his house.

I tracked her down in retirement. Her husband is now deceased. I found that, yes, she had a very good recollection of her close association with Dr. Menzel; however, she was concerned that no classified data be revealed. We made an appointment by phone for me to visit her. She broke it with a lame excuse and had clearly talked with some people. From my contacts at Harvard, I know that she had expressed concern to Menzel's daughters and to Mrs. Menzel. She was worried. I had really spooked her. I have had subsequent conversations with her by phone and again it is clear she was keeping it as far away from discussions about MJ-12 as was possible. I got the impression that she knew what I was talking about, but felt that she couldn't say anything because of security. She certainly recognized the names of the MJ-12 people; not surprising, I suppose, considering their prominence. I will keep up my efforts to elicit more information from her.

Many people have objected to the notion that a man like Donald Menzel could, on the one hand, attack ufologists and ufology and explain away all cases, and on the other hand be on the inside of a UFO cover-up. Can anybody really keep his true feelings so separated? Could he live a lie? Could he not tell his close friends and his family? My answer is yes. Menzel, who was known for his discretion and who appreciated the need for separating classified and unclassified activities, could have been on the inside of one of the most important postwar scientific events imaginable: the capture and recovery of an extraterrestrial spacecraft.

For examples of people who have managed to lead double lives, one need not go far. Take the three Soviet spies who were well-established in the British Intelligence Service MI-5, Burgess, MacLean, and Philby. They fooled their associates, family, friends, for more than 15 years, in a very much more difficult situation. Klaus Fuchs was the brilliant scientist who turned over an enormous amount of information about the atomic bomb project to the Soviets. His traitorous efforts came as a complete shock to his associates. He did it out of ideological convictions, not monetary ones, incidentally.

Menzel, of course, was a loyal citizen, but the fact that he was on the inside would have appealed to his ego. The fact that he was associated with one of the most important projects ever conceived would certainly have soothed any concerns he had. He would also have been aware of the need for protecting the technology associated with saucers, for the need to prepare the public for an idea with as much impact as the notion of extraterrestrial visitation. He was certainly aware of the Soviet threat. His contacts were worldwide in terms of radio propagation, astrophysics, eclipse expeditions. It was clear to other members of the committee that Menzel could have serious influence in keeping professional astronomers and other

scientists away from the UFO question which probably would have been considered desirable since too much prying would have revealed the secret existence of a project such as Operation Majestic 12.

It seems strange indeed that over the past year I have found myself defending Donald Menzel. I didn't like the man when he was alive. I was shocked by the inadequacy of his ufological research. I found his approach and his correspondence with Ed Condon, for example, distressing indeed. But, having gone through as much material as I have, I have developed great respect for Donald Menzel. He may have been egotistical (a word I heard often from his associates, and it comes through in some of his writing about his background); however, I have to respect his discretion in maintaining an active life on behalf of his country and I admire his patriotism. I have to sympathize with the ordeal of the loyalty hearings. Would you believe that among the charges against him for disloyalty was the fact that he led an eclipse expedition to the Soviet Union in 1936? That he had said nice things at a government dinner honoring Soviet-American friendship during the war, as did everybody else at the dinner? That his wife had given a pair of stockings to a Soviet astronomer to take home to his wife?

The people who made the charges against him didn't even show up at the loyalty hearings, which were a travesty, and yet he refused to reveal his TOP SECRET ULTRA Navy clearance; he didn't go public even in this period of great personal and professional distress. I have talked with people who worked with him during the war and who knew nothing of the loyalty hearings. His approach to engineering I found significant. His close association with numerous top-level scientists was a clear indication of the respect in which he was held.

Some, such as his friend Ernest Taves, maintain that while indeed Menzel would have been called in, if such an event had occurred as the crash of a flying saucer, there would have been no need for secrecy past the first few months and that Menzel certainly would have told him (Taves) about it! This is an insult to Dr. Menzel. In the first place, it is clear there *was* and is a national security aspect: the technology of the saucer and the potential benefit; the influence on society of any announcement concerning the reality of alien visitors which could cause enormous upheaval in religion, politics, economics. Second, Menzel and all others who had high-level clearances during the war had long since learned to be discreet. Dr. Bush was famous for his insistence on compartmentalization of information. His glowing review of Menzel's discretion is testimony in itself.

I have talked with dozens of World War II generals, intelligence agents, and others in an attempt to get more information. Universally it was agreed that secrets *can* be kept and that people with high-level clearances simply do *not* tell their families or friends anything about their classified knowledge and work. Such people remain silent because to talk puts one's family at risk. If enemies think they can extract impor-

tant classified information from the families of people who have it, they will resort to kidnapping, torture or other coercion. Moreover, once one has accepted the notion that highly classified information should not be distributed to people who don't have a need to know, one doesn't pass that information on. Every one of the old timers I talked with agrees that there are "black" programs that we will probably never know about. The strongest push for the notion that secrets can't be kept comes from those people who haven't kept secrets. Not surprisingly, even Dr. Hynek during his lifetime admitted that he was well aware of Vannevar Bush's concern with compartmentalization and security, because Hynek worked at the Applied Physics Laboratory at Johns Hopkins University on the proximity fuse. It was one of the projects under the direction of the Office of Scientific Research and Development. Bush's strong views about security were well known down the line.

It is certainly true that I have not been able to provide a smoking gun about Donald Howard Menzel's involvement in Operation Majestic-12. This is not surprising, especially if, as noted by Wilbert Smith, "The subject of flying saucers is the most classified subject in the United States." What I have been able to do, I believe, is to demonstrate to any reasonable person that Donald Menzel could very well have been a part of such a high-level group. He had the right kinds of knowledge, he had the right security clearances, he maintained a long and patriotic involvement with classified work at the end of the war, and he had a close association with the top-level people involved in Majestic-12.

I am continuing my work. I have received the Finder's Guides for various papers from the Eisenhower Administration dealing with science activities of one sort or another. In all probability I will have to visit the library to go through these in much more detail. At a cost of \$.35 a page, one simply does not order thousands of pages of material without knowing what is in it. I intend to visit both the Truman and Eisenhower Libraries and to be in Washington, D.C., again, knowing more of what I am looking for and with the advantage of things like Personal Service contracts between Dr. Lloyd Berkner and the Executive Office of the President as a lever to unlock other such contracts with other members of Operation Majestic-12.

It is of some interest, indeed, that none of the several Menzel biographies that can be found in a good library deal at all with his close connection after World War II with intelligence agencies. The articles in *Current Biography*, the McGraw-Hill *Modern Scientists and Engineers*, *Who's Who in America*, and the eight-page appreciation by his former student and longtime astronomer colleague Leo Goldberg (*Sky and Telescope*, April 1977) do give a good picture of Menzel's many interests and major contributions, both to astronomy and to the war effort. There is mention of his UFO-debunking, but not a hint of the NSA, CIA, or his connections with the military and Bush. Discretion and patriotism were two prominent features of his fascinating career. It may well be that his greatest contribution was his participation in the MJ-12 epic.

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