

Here's a Trial Balloon: A Trump-DeSantis Pact for 2024 and 2028



by Conrad Black

There is something both ludicrous and appropriate to the controversy over shooting down balloons and “objects” in the last week. Almost none of it makes any sense.

The idea that Communist China is deliberately releasing into the airstream balloons that can confidently be presumed will drift over North America and across the United States, confers upon the Chinese leadership a completely unsuspected sense of humor, a flare for mockery stopping well short of dangerous provocation, and an unprecedented talent for making relations between the world's two leading powers simultaneously more antagonistic and less worrisome because of the introduction to them of a ridiculous element.

This cannot possibly be an effective method of gathering intelligence not already available to the Chinese from long-tolerated high-altitude reconnaissance of the kind initially suggested by President Eisenhower at the Geneva summit conference of 1955 in his "open skies" proposal.

There is no excuse for allowing the first and largest balloon to overfly all of the United States and part of Canada from Alaska to South Carolina at a stately pace and a relatively low altitude for aerial reconnaissance. To borrow a graphic phrase from the Pentagon in the 1950's on the subject of the first effort at an anti-missile missile, the Nike-Zeus, administration attention to the subject of these sudden but plodding intrusions "escalated from the ground to 60,000 feet in three heartbeats."

Within a week of the Pentagon's helpful daily update on the Chinese balloons' ceremonious overflight of our continent, the Americans and Canadians appeared united in preveniently aroused trigger-happiness, and they were jubilantly shooting out of the sky a miscellany of unexplained "objects."

There is a lengthy though patchy history to hostile ballooning over North America. On April 7, 1945, Canada's Minister of National Defense, General Andrew McNaughton, wrote to the long-serving premier of Québec, Canada's French-speaking province, Maurice Duplessis, about intercontinental Japanese balloons.

The general, who was a highly respected soldier and defense minister, informed and incredulous Duplessis that these balloons were "made of strong paper" and carried incendiary bombs designed to detonate over the forests of northern and central Québec, although this is in eastern Canada directly north of New York State and New England.

McNaughton allowed that these balloons could be used to wage bacteriological warfare, but reassured Duplessis that "it is

not felt that they will be used to carry enemy soldiers." He continued on this exotic threat which was simultaneous with the fierce fighting on Okinawa in the last months of the Pacific War, for three full pages.

The Québec leader's files disclose that he had some doubts of the sanity of those who produced this warning but replied that his government would "cooperate towards the protection of our country and our province in regard to the most unusual and extraordinary dangers you refer to in your letter concerning the so-called Japanese balloons."

In order not to waste completely this opportunity to correspond with the federal government, with which Duplessis had many differences, he added "that the province of Québec must emphatically, and rightly so, oppose the establishment in our province of concentration camps, or other similar institutions, relating to interned Japanese or Japanese war prisoners." No one was suggesting this and it was just as irrelevant as the bunk about the balloons which never materialized over Canada, but at least it was an attempt to link this low-tech science-fiction to a tangible terrestrial issue.

Surprising aerial appearances of "objects" is a long-standing phenomenon that has frequently afflicted the judgment of even the most astute and cool-headed senior national security officials. On February 26, 1942, just seven weeks after the attack at Pearl Harbor, the Army chief of staff and newly appointed occupant of what would soon become the greatest military command in all of history, chairman of the combined Allied military chiefs, General George C. Marshall, subsequently a very distinguished secretary of State and of Defense, sent President Roosevelt a memorandum in which he expressed his belief that the Japanese had secured 15 commercial aircraft that had overflowed Los Angeles the previous day "between 3.12 and 4:15 a.m."

Marshall advised the commander-in-chief that this mission had been undertaken "for purposes of spreading alarm." It had obviously succeeded in that, despite the fact that, of course, no such mission was initiated and the anti-aircraft batteries that fired "1430 rounds" mercifully failed to bring down anything at that unfashionable hour. Marshall's memo concluded: "Investigation continuing."

Where the general imagined the Japanese had commandeered these aircraft, the point of their take-off and ultimate landing remains a mystery: there was never any attempt to attach any credence to this fantasy and FDR ignored it. The reports of alien intruders and UFOs are legion and proverbial and have generated a massed corps of tin-foil hat loopies.

The traditional technological flaw in an apparent foreign reconnaissance shoot-down most memorably perpetrated in the U-2 affair of 1960, when there was an engine failure and as the Soviet government did not acknowledge that the captain of the plane, Gary Powers, had parachuted out and been captured, the Eisenhower administration claimed that it was a weather reconnaissance flight.

The captured aviator, with vigorous encouragement from his hosts, contradicted this version to the administration's great embarrassment. Last week it seems that one of the Sidewinder missiles directed at one of the balloons, the ultimate sitting duck for a sophisticated jet interceptor, missed its target. It all has some of the air of an aeronautical inspector Clouseau.

This seems to have superseded the classified documents charade as the pseudo-controversy for February. Every aspect of the classified document issue was nonsense invented by Democratic Party strategists to hobble President Trump and, it seems, help dissuade their own leader from seeking reelection. The net effect of it has been to weaken substantially the ability of the Democrats or their slavish media echo chamber to

continue to persuade significant numbers of sensible electors that the former president is an unindicted felon.

This gradually strengthens Mr. Trump's hand in what could be a close nomination contest with Governor DeSantis. This still-new year constitutes the longest period in some decades when Mr. Trump has done nothing to affront conventional opinion, and this comparative tranquility, if it continues, should gradually dilute some of the negative reaction to him.

The economic news is more hopeful for Mr. Biden and the administration has been reasonably purposeful about China and has a defensible record in Ukraine (without giving any indication of how it expects that war to end). These factors and the gradual revival of Mr. Trump may help renominate Mr. Biden.

The logical course for the Republicans would be for Messrs. Trump and DeSantis to agree that the older man is the nominee next year and will support Mr. DeSantis in 2028. If Messrs. Trump and Biden can both gain renomination, Mr. Trump could surely win the rematch.

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