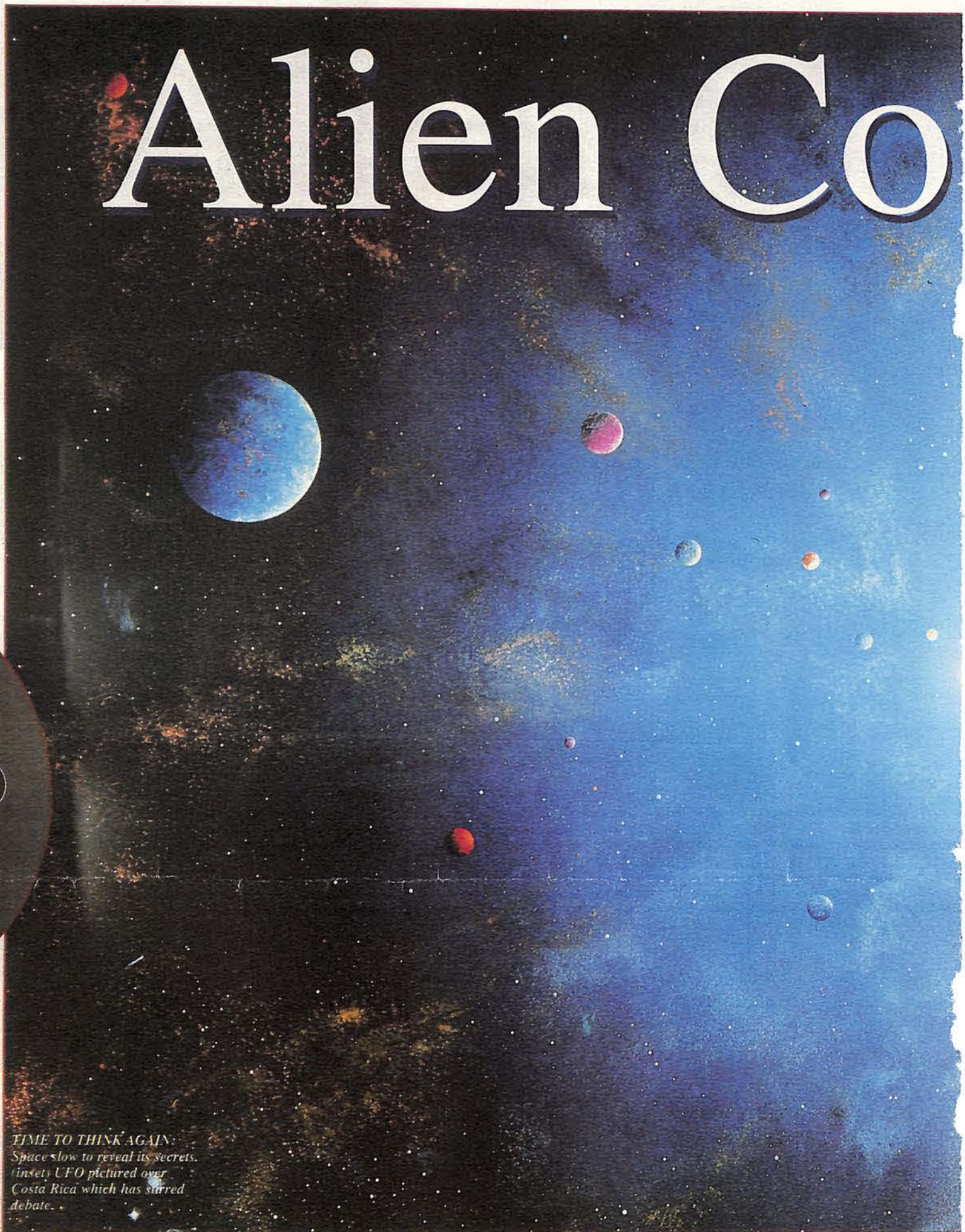


UFO's once the preserve of the purely paranoid are now being taken seriously. Astronauts, Generals and a number of influential scientists are hammering away at the crust of international scepticism. LESLIE KEAN explains why a study by the French military may finally make governments sit up and take notice.



THE release in April of the first detailed satellite images of Area 51, the top-secret Air Force test site in Nevada, prompted a website meltdown as people from around the world searched for clues about unidentified flying objects.

"The interest has been really phenomenal," said David Mountain, marketing director for Aerial Images, Inc which posted the high resolution aerial photos of Area 51 on the Internet. But those hoping to see signs of something extraordinary were destined to be disappointed. Most of Area 51s operations occur underground, making photos meaningless. Anyone looking for the fresh information on UFOs would have better luck trying a new, but less publicized source: by the French military, just translated into English. High level officials -- including retired generals from the French Institute of Higher Studies for National Defense, a government-funded strategic planning agency -- recently took a giant step in openly challenging skepticism about UFOs. In a report based on a three year study, they concluded that, "numerous manifestations observed by reliable witnesses could be the work of craft of



*TIME TO THINK AGAIN:
Space slow to reveal its secrets.
(inset) UFO pictured over
Costa Rica which has stirred
debate.*

extra-terrestrial origin" and that, in fact, the best explanation is "the extraterrestrial hypothesis." Although not categorically proven, "strong presumptions exist in its favor and if it is correct, it is loaded with significant consequences."

The French group reached that conclusion after examining nearly 500 detailed international aeronautical sightings and radar/visual cases, and previously undisclosed pilots' reports. They drew on data from official sources, government authorities, and the Air Forces of different countries. The findings are contained in a 90-page report titled, "UFOs

and Defense: What Should We Prepare For?," published in France by the magazine VSD.

THE MECHANICS OF A MYSTERY

"The number of sightings, which are completely unexplained despite the abundance and quality of data from them, is growing throughout the world," the team declared. The authors note that about 5 percent of sightings on which there is solid documentation cannot be easily attributed to earthly sources, such as secret military exercises - especially since

unexplained objects have been reported since 1944. The rest "seem to be completely unknown flying machines with exceptional performances that are guided by a natural or artificial intelligence," they say. Science has developed plausible models for travel from another solar system and for technology which could be used to propel the vehicles, the report says.

It assures readers that UFOs have demonstrated no hostile acts, "although intimidation maneuvers have been confirmed."

Given the widespread scepticism about