

For Many Americans, Existence of UFOs Is an Article of Faith

By Barry James
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For many ufologists, it's another government cover up. This month, the U.S. Department of Defense attempted once again to convince the American people that the military has not made contact with aliens, is not harboring an alien base under the Nevada desert and is not harboring the remains of unidentified flying objects.

In fact, a Pentagon spokesman said, the military gave up the search for aliens 18 years ago because it was considered a waste of taxpayers' money.

The conspiracy theorists who abound in America and literally swarm on the Internet might point out that 18 years is about as long as little gray beings with pointy heads and wraparound eyes have been stealing people from their beds in the middle of the night and forcing them to take part in a kind of intergalactic breeding program.

The fact that most of these abductions take place in the United States, said Philip J. Klass, a longtime skeptic, is an indication either than Americans are tastier, or "we have more kooks."

Ufology began 50 years ago this summer when a pilot, Kenneth Arnold, reported sighting a formation of silvery disks above Mount Rainier on June 24, 1947. Newspapers coined the expression "flying saucers," and within a few months accounts of more sightings started pouring in by the hundreds.

Two weeks after Mr. Arnold had his vision, a rancher in New Mexico found some unusual wreckage — bits and pieces of a thin, lightweight silvery material with patterns that resembled

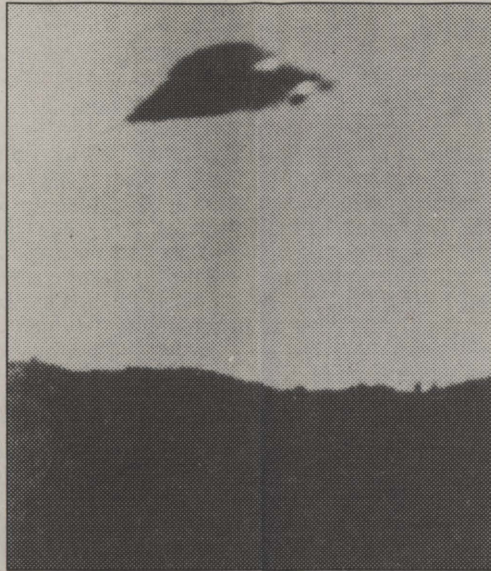
hieroglyphs. The wreckage was taken to the nearby Roswell Air Base, where a spokesman announced that the Army Air Corps had recovered a "flying disk."

Although the statement was quickly retracted, the lore about aliens spread unchecked amid the secrecy surrounding America's nuclear weapons development, and now seems as deeply implanted in the human consciousness as earlier myths about fairies, witches or demons.

Ufology, said Mr. Klass in an interview, "is a modern substitute for religion." Indeed, the California cultists who committed suicide to join a spaceship they believed to be traveling in the wake of the Hale-Bopp comet borrowed a concept believed by millions of American born-again Protestants — that at the end of the world, the chosen few will be "raptured" into heaven while the rest stay below to fight it out at the Battle of Armageddon.

Many UFO buffs are convinced that the government has recovered alien bodies and an intact flying saucer. Some say they know for sure that aliens have a base in southern Nevada known as Area 51 or more simply as Dreamland, and others believe just as firmly that the government has signed a treaty with the gray intruders — their technology in exchange for the right to abduct Americans for use in medical experiments and a breeding program. That's not all. Among ufologists, aliens are widely held responsible for the deaths of cattle, whose remains, always "surgically dissected," are left to baffle small-town sheriffs.

A few true believers, who call themselves "starseed," are firmly convinced that they themselves ARE aliens, but hardened conspiracy the-



Acme Telephoto

A photo of a "flying saucer" taken in 1951. The photographer, Guy Marquand, said he took the picture near Riverside, California.

orists dismiss them as government plants to discredit the UFO movement.

The U.S. Air Force and the General Accounting Office have both issued lengthy reports saying the wreckage found in 1947 came from a balloon used to track evidence of Soviet nuclear explosions.

As alien speculation mounted with the arrival of the Hale-Bopp comet and the suicide of Cali-

fornia cultists, a Defense Department spokesman, Ken Bacon, stated, "We cannot substantiate the existence of UFOs, and we are not harboring remains of UFOs."

Mr. Bacon said that between 1947 and 1969, as part of "Project Blue Book," the air force investigated 12,618 sightings and found no evidence that any were extraterrestrial vehicles.

What the Pentagon spokesman did not and could not explain is why so many Americans and a growing number of people around the world believe that they have been abducted by aliens. The mythology about alien kidnapping began to accrue in the 1960s with the publication of John G. Fuller's book, "The Interrupted Journey," which told how a couple, Barney and Betty Hill, were abducted off a lonely road, taken to a space craft and subjected to medical experiments.

In the 1980s, a New York artist called Budd Hopkins uncovered hundreds of similar stories by hypnotizing subjects, writing about their experiences in two books, "Missing Time," and "Intruders." He sent many of the subjects to a Harvard psychiatrist, John Mack, whose views, which he wrote about in a 1994 best-seller called "Abduction," is essentially that if people believe they have been taken by aliens it must be true. Earlier, Whitley Strieber, a science-fiction writer, told about his personal abduction experience in a best-seller called "Communion."

But like tales of childhood sexual abuse, all of these accounts have emerged under hypnosis with, critics say, a lot of suggestion from the therapists.

"There is zero hard evidence of any sort," said

a Harvard colleague of Dr. Mack, the physicist Paul Horowitz. "There are only anecdotes, experiences earnestly believed but not buttressed by any sort of real evidence."

Robert Baker, emeritus professor of psychology at the University of Kentucky, said that the abductions were real enough to those who say they experience them. "During the middle ages, they were called incubus and succubus attacks," he said. "The modern equivalent of the demons is the aliens. These are what we call waking dreams."

David Hufford, professor of humanities at Penn State medical school, said the cause is sleep paralysis. "Most people," he said, "will tell you, 'I woke up, I couldn't move. There was something frightening in the room with me. It wanted to do me harm.'"

"One person might say, 'So I think it was an alien.' Someone else might think it was an abominable snowman. That is a matter of inference from their culture."

Bill Ellis, a folklorist at Penn State, said he believed that all people have the same kind of dreams, but the way they express them conforms to their culture. "An ancient Greek might have seen it as going up with the Gods," he said. "In 20th century America, it is seen as being abducted by aliens."

In telling their stories, Mr. Ellis said, "abductees" resort to the images supplied by Hollywood and particularly by television. Pseudo-documentary programs like the "X-Files," in which a couple of FBI agents investigate alien happenings as routinely as though they were ordinary homicides, blur the line between fact and fiction.