Cosmic Conspiracy: Six Decades of Government UFO Cover-Ups, Part Six

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Editor's note: In the final installment of our six-part series on alleged government cover-ups and UFOs, we look at the most controversial case of the 1990s.

The sun sinks beyond the jagged Groom Mountains like a bloated red basketball. As temperatures plummet in the thin desert air, we make our way up a narrow arroyo to the base of White Sides, a towering jumble of limestone ledges overlooking the super-secret air base below, our hiking boots making crunching sounds in the growing darkness.

We've been whispering and walking side-by-side. Now our guide, a young mountain goat by the name of Glenn Campbell, takes the lead. "Damn!" he suddenly hisses, "they've erased them again," referring to the orange arrows spray-painted on the white rocks a few days earlier. "They" are the anonymous individuals Campbell refers to as the "cammo dudes." Thought to be civilian employees of the Air Force, they patrol the perimeter of the unacknowledged base in white all-terrain vehicles, monitoring electronic detectors and, by the way, erasing signposts like those on the rocks. When interlopers cross the military boundaries or haul out their cameras, it's the cammo dudes who call in the local constabulary, the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department, to confiscate the film.

Campbell assures us that we don't have to worry, though. For one thing, we all agreed to leave our cameras locked in our cars at the bottom of White Sides. For another, we're still on public property, well outside the restricted zone which comprises part of the vast Nellis Air Force Range complex and stretches more than halfway from here to Las Vegas, 100 miles away. "Besides," he says cheerfully, "it'll take the sheriff 40 minutes to get here. By that time we'll already be on top, and he'll have to wait for us to get down."

Still, White Sides is no cake walk. Beginning at about 5,000 feet, it rises in altitude for another 1,000 feet. From here, however, you can peer down on one of the world's longest runways and one of the Cold War's most isolated inner sanctums. It was here, variously known as Groom Lake, Area 51, Dreamland, or simply the Ranch, that sophisticated black-budget (that is, off-the-record) projects like the U-2, SR-71 Blackbird, and F-117A Stealth fighter first earned their wings in secrecy. And it was 15 miles south of

here, at an even more clandestine (and controversial) base of operations known as Area S4 at Papoose Lake, that shadowy physicist Robert Lazar claimed to have helped study captured flying-saucer technology.

Because of its remoteness, spying on alleged Area S4 is out of the question, which leaves Groom Lake as the next best UFO mecca, assuming the many rumors surrounding these remote outposts are rooted even in half-truths. We break out our binoculars and sweep the runway, clearly outlined by a string of small red lights. At one end, backed up against the base of the Groom Mountains, squats a collection of radar arrays and giant hangars, feebly illuminated on this Saturday night by fan-shaped rays of yellow light. "Looks like they're shut down for the weekend," Campbell whispers.

Still, the thrill of visually eavesdropping on this country's most secret air base sends a certain chill up the spine, where it mingles with the growing desert chill and the memory of the signs at the bottom of White Sides authorizing the use of deadly force. All remains eerily silent, however; not so much as a cricket, cammo dude, sheriff, or UFO disturbs the night. After a few hours of fruitless surveillance, fingers and toes numbed by the cold, we start back down.

Campbell, a retired computer programmer, explains why he left the comfy confines of his native Boston and moved lock, stock, and Mac Powerbook to Rachel, a hardscrabble community of 100 smack in the middle of the Nevada desert. "You go where the UFO stories are," he says, "and in the fall of 1992, when I first came here, Dreamland was where they were." Campbell had read an article published the year before in the monthly journal of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) detailing some of the exploits of Lazar, who claimed to have actually been aboard one of nine recovered flying saucers sequestered at Area S4 while helping reverse-engineer their apparent antigravity propulsion system. (See OMNI, April 1994.) In a series of November 1989 interviews with then-anchorman George Knapp of KLAS-TV, the Las Vegas CBS affiliate, Lazar went public with his claims. Dreamland, at least, was now in the public domain.

Though Lazar's credibility has recently taken a nosedive, even with UFO insiders, Knapp, now senior vice president with the Altamira Communications Group, an independent video production company, notes that "stories of captured or acquired alien technology have circulated in the area since the mid 1950s and the very beginning of the base." His best source, among the 14 he has interviewed to date, is a member of a prominent Nevada family who will not allow his name to be used, although he has supposedly videotaped a deposition to be given to Knapp upon his death. According to Knapp, his source occupied a position of senior management at Groom Lake during the late Fifties and early Sixties, and admitted that at least one extraordinary craft was being test flown and taken apart. "It's the totality of the accounts, not any specific one, that I find convincing," says

Knapp.

Spurred by the local lore following his first visit, Campbell returned to Boston, packed his belongings in a rickety Toyota camper, and in January of 1993 moved to Rachel, setting up shop in the dusty parking lot of the Little A-Le-Inn, a combination bar and restaurant turned UFO museum, joint jumping-off point, watering-hole headquarters, and sometime conference center for UFOlogists hoping to repeat the earlier Lazar sightings. Campbell began his own investigation and was soon desktop publishing the Area 51 Viewer's Guide, of which he estimates he has now sold more than 2,000 copies.

As reports of UFOs in the area soared, so did Campbell's reputation as de facto onsite guide. In the last year alone, virtually every major media outlet in the country, from CNN, NBC, and ABC News to the New York Times, has beaten a path to Campbell's door. Despite the temptation to turn tabloid, Campbell seems to have kept his head on straight. "I am still interested in the UFO phenomenon," he says, "but the evidence has to speak for itself. I've been living here night and day for over a year now and still haven't seen anything that couldn't be explained." He's also seen satisfied believers come and go. "But most of what they report," Campbell warns, "is ordinary military activity, from Russian MiGs to parachute flares. You pretty much see what you want to see, depending on what kind of expectations you bring to the table."

A case in point is so-called Old Faithful. In the wake of Lazar's allegations, observers were soon reporting a brilliant UFO adhering to a rigid schedule at 4:50 every weekday morning. Campbell, a UFOlogist who readily admits he likes his sleep, nonetheless routinely roused himself--until he became convinced that what he was seeing was nothing more than the landing lights of an approaching 737. Methodical by nature, Campbell purchased a radio scanner and began monitoring flights outside McCarran Airport in Las Vegas. It turned out that Janet, a private charter airline, routinely flies into Groom Lake from Las Vegas, transporting workers as Lazar had previously alleged. Old Faithful was their early morning flight, and in the next release of his Viewer's Guide, Campbell published the airline's complete schedule.

But stories of alleged alien involvement at or near Area 51 continue. On the evening of March 16, 1993, William Hamilton, director of investigations for MUFON Los Angeles, and a companion were parked alongside Highway 375 near the popular Black Mailbox viewing area when a bright light winked into view to their right. "I looked at it through binoculars," Hamilton remembers, "and it seemed to be on or near the Groom Road and casting a beam [of light] on the ground." As it drew nearer, according to Hamilton, "the light appeared to be an object the size of a bus with square light panels lifting off from the ground. The panels appeared to glow amber and blue-white."

A bus does travel the dirt road leading into Groom Lake, transporting civilian workers who gather every morning at nearby Alamo for the 30- to 40-mile ride, returning in the afternoon. But this bus was clearly out of the ordinary, says Hamilton. As he watched, "the lights rapidly resolved into two glowing orbs or discs of brilliant blue-white light, so bright they hurt my eyes." The two baby suns rapidly approached the parked car and confusion reigned. When Hamilton looked at his watch, approximately 30 minutes of time were missing. Hypnotically regressed later, both Hamilton and his companion had memories of being abducted aboard a UFO by now-traditional little gray beings with large dark eyes, the leader of whom in this case referred to himself as Quaylar.

Campbell was at the Little A-Le-Inn when the couple returned. "I can attest they were both visibly shaken," he says, "but neither had any memory of an abduction at that time. I don't know what to think. I've spent many a night in Tikaboo Valley, where the sighting occurred, and as far as I know nothing like that has ever happened to me. I've never seen or experienced anything that I couldn't explain."

It may be that the remote desert interface between alleged extraterrestrial technology and known or suspected terrestrial technology predisposes or inflames the human imagination to see flying buses where only earthly ones exist. Light can play tricks in the thin air, making determination of distance and brilliance doubly difficult at best. Or it could be that the latest generation of Stealth and other secret platforms being test flown out of Groom Lake demonstrate such odd performance characteristics that they are easily misidentified at night as one of Lazar's reputed H-PACs--Human-Piloted Alien Craft. Rumors have long circulated of a hypersonic high-altitude spyplane, code named Aurora, designed to replace the recently retired SR-71 Blackbird. Both the Air Force and Aurora's alleged manufacturer, Northrop's secret Skunk Works facility at Palmdale, California, deny any knowledge of such a platform. Another potential candidate is the TR-33A Black Mantra, an electronic warfare platform widely rumored to have flown support for the F-117 Stealth fighter during Operation Desert Storm. Other advanced airforms could be in research and development, too, their operating expenditures buried in the Pentagon's estimated $14.3 billion per year black-budget programs.

Even with the Cold War apparently successfully concluded--and the strategic necessity of much of our black budget presumably obviated--the Air Force can't be happy campers at Groom Lake. They certainly don't relish the prospect of a growing number of UFOlogists and media types, increasingly armed with sophisticated video cameras and night-vision equipment, all on the prowl for H-PACs or UFOs, stumbling across a plane which they've gone to a great deal of trouble to keep secret from both Russian and American citizens, presumably in our own best interests.

But previous attempts to seal off Groom Lake from public scrutiny have met with just partial success. In 1984, the Air Force seized (or withdrew, in their vernacular) some 89,000 acres on the northeast quadrant of the Nellis Test Range in order to provide a better buffer zone for the base. Due to a surveying error, White Sides and a few other vantage points were overlooked. But then, in the wake of the Lazar story, Campbell and other UFOlogists began making the trek up White Sides, triggering security perimeter alarms and forcing the cammo dudes out of their white vehicles.

Subsequently, on October 18, 1993, the Air Force filed a request in the Federal Register seeking the withdrawal of an additional 3,792 acres, presently public property under the control of the Bureau of Land Management. Not surprisingly, White Sides is contained within the new acreage, as is another lookout point discovered by Campbell and dubbed Freedom Ridge. The additional land was needed, the Air Force claimed, "to ensure the public safety and the safe and secure operation of activities in the Nellis Air Force Range complex." No mention by name was made of Groom Lake, the air base that doesn't officially exist.

By now, Campbell had become a professional prickly-pear in the Air Force's exposed side. He formed the White Sides Defense Committee and publicized the public hearings the Bureau of Land Management was required by law to hold. The Air Force request is currently on hold, awaiting an environmental assessment and final approval. In the meantime, Campbell formed Secrecy Oversight Council to market his Viewer's Guide and an assortment of Area 51 souvenirs, including topographical maps, bumper stickers, and a colorful, self-designed Groom Lake sew-on patch. More recently, he took out an address on the electronic highway and began publishing a series of regular digital updates, "The Desert Rat," including a map detailing the location of known magnetic sensors. And he tweaked a few local noses with a defiant fashion statement, updating his own apparel to match the desert camouflage suit of the cammo dudes, shade for shade.

Such pranks aside, Campbell insists he's a serious civilian spy. "The difference between me and the Air Force is that I don't have any secrets," he says, "and everything I do is legal." On at least two occasions Campbell and visiting journalists were buzzed by low-flying helicopters called in from Groom Lake, both times while clearly on public property outside the restricted zone. "The rotor wash throws up a tremendous amount of dust and debris," he notes, "endangering us and the helicopter crew, too." Indeed, the Secrecy Oversight Council tracked down the appropriate Air Force regulation and found that pilots are restricted to a minimum of 500 feet altitude except when taking off or landing.

But if the Air Force is peeved or perplexed by Campbell's activities, they aren't saying so in public. "We know who Mr. Campbell is," admits Major George Sillia, public affairs officer at Nellis AFB, Las Vegas. "He keeps us informed as to what he's up to. Beyond that, what can I say? He's an American citizen, and

they have a right to certain activities on public property." The Air Force is more mum about the existence of Groom Lake itself. "We can neither confirm nor deny the existence of a facility at Groom Lake," Sillia adds, "and if we can't confirm its existence, we certainly can't say anything about it."

A more vocal Campbell critic is Jim Bilbray, a Democratic congressman from Las Vegas who sits on both the House Armed Services Committee and the Select House Committee on Intelligence. Without mentioning Campbell by name, Bilbray says that "these people are persistent, and if they're taking pictures, they're breaking the law. But that really isn't the problem; there's even a Soviet satellite photo of Groom Lake in circulation. The problem comes when you have to shut down operations and secure the technology, which is time-consuming and costly, and which they have to do every time someone is up on the mountain. And believe me, they make sure they know when you're up there."

Bilbray also doesn't subscribe to the argument that now that the Cold War is apparently over there is a concurrent corollary that reduces the need for secrecy in general and secret high-tech technology in particular. "The Nellis Range is one of the few secure areas in the country where you can test these new technologies," he says. "And most people in the intelligence community will tell you that the world is a more, not less, dangerous place, now that the old system of checks and balances between the two superpowers has seriously broken down."

Still, Bilbray admits that he, the Air Force, and other government agencies are caught in a classic Catch-22 situation vis-a-vis UFOlogists. "I can't name them," he says, "but I can tell you that I've been on virtually every facility in the Nellis Range and that there are no captured flying saucers or extraterrestrial bodies out there. I've heard all the rumors. But the minute I say I've been to one valley, the UFOlogists are going to ask, what about the next valley over, or claim that everything has been moved. Well, what about the next valley over? We used to test atomic bombs above ground here and some of the valleys are still so hot that a Geiger counter will start spitting the moment you turn it on. Doesn't sound like a very good place to test flying saucers or hide alien bodies to me."

But researchers like Campbell say they're in a Catch-22 as well, because they know the Air Force routinely denies things that do exist, beginning with the big secret base on the edge of Groom Lake. If it didn't exist, why would they need more space to keep you from seeing it? And if Groom Lake exists, then why not Aurora, the Black Mantra, and possibly even a UFO or two?

Nature abhors a vacuum, and where a lack of openness and a penchant for secrecy persists, rumor and rumors of rumors are sure to flourish, even in the middle of the desert. "You just keep shaking the secrecy tree," an unperturbed and determined Campbell advises, "and, hopefully, something drops out."

That may prove increasingly difficult to do, at least from White Sides or Freedom Ridge. Bilbray, who supports the latest withdrawal of land around Groom Lake, advises that Congress, while it has the opportunity to object and call for a review, does not have to give approval, and the Bureau of Land Management will most assuredly approve the Air Force's request, "probably within this year."

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