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#### NIGHTMARE IN DREAMLAND:

A lawyer is threatened with jail as the US government claims the right to hide its crimes at a secret Air Base, reports Ed Vulliamy.

(Picture #1: Area 51: Only the mountains appear on the maps as the government denies it exists, but clandestine images of the base are on the Internet)

While the movie Independence Day is packing cinemas with its story of aliens and a secret base called Area 51, a surreal law suit that echoes its plot is building into a secrecy trial of great significance.

One of America's leading public-interest lawyers is threatened with 10 years in jail after bringing a case over secrecy and death at the real Area 51, also known as "Dreamland", on the desert plains of Nevada. Its existence is denied by the government.

For the first time in American history, an administration is claiming that if it has committed crimes, it has the right to classify the evidence. Even the Nixon and Reagan administrations did not claim such privilege. Recent incidents show the Clinton administration to be obsessed with secrecy and surveillance.

Evidence includes a rapid increase in authorised telephone taps and the calling-in of FBI files on political opponents.

In the movie, space aliens are kept by the Air Force at Area 51, and the President takes refuge there during a UFO assault. In the real world, workers at Area 51 have died or developed fatal diseases while building the Stealth fighter bomber and other supersonic aircraft.

The workers are suing the government. It, in turn, is threatening to imprison their lawyer, Jonathan Turley, if he refuses to hand over all his case papers which it asserts include classified documents. These would reveal the names of his clients and their evidence.

Turley, director of the environmental law project at George Washington University, who gives his services free, said the consequences of compliance "would be that no whistle-blower -or anyone who wants to break ranks to tell some truth- can be legally represented or afforded any reliable legal protection". If Turley refuses -which, he told The Observer, he must- he faces imprisonment and loss of a legal licence.

The Area 51 workers have testified to witnessing criminal breaches of environmental law which directly caused their illnesses. They are suing the President's National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, Secretary of State for Defence William Perry and Air Force chief Sheila Widnall as responsible for Area 51 at the Groom dry salt lake, north of the Nellis Air Force Base.

One client is Helen Frost, whose husband, Bill, died of horrific skin diseases and chemical burns after working at Area 51. The others are former workmates who suffered similar diseases, some of whom are close to death.

Area 51 has a bizarre history, part fantastical, part very real. It was developed to build and test prototypes for the then secret Blackbird supersonic spy plane. Later it became the high temple of UFOs and alienology. Enthusiasts became convinced that the parts of a supposed flying saucer which crashed at Roswell, New Mexico, in the 1950s were taken to Area 51. Bob Lazar, scientist working on supersonic planes, said he had worked with space aliens on developing the technology. The theme was excitedly taken up in Independence Day.

(Picture #2: The White House is destroyed in "Independence Day" - a surreal parallel with the mirage of Area 51)

In reality, the facility continued to be a laboratory for the next century's fighting aircraft. the Stealth fighter bomber was prototyped and tested there, and now work is under way on the Aurora, which will be able to fly at 3'000 mph, leaving no radar trace.

The government's insistence that the facility does not exist means it is not on any maps. Two years ago, The Observer visited the area. the supersonic jets roared below a desert sky bright with stars. A long mountain track led to what campaigners called "Freedom Ridge", from which one could see the hangars, runways and planes landing and taking off in the harsh sunlight. "Freedom Ridge" has since been closed by a Pentagon order, commandeering another 40'000 acres.

The aircraft flyovers merely fuel the ardour of UFO enthusiasts, who stay at the Little Ale Inn trailer motel and marvel at their sightings. More important, each day at 3am, an unmarked 747 leaves Las Vegas airport carrying men to work, to build the air force's latest machines. Turley's clients come from among these men, with tales of open trenches filled with ferocious toxins used as paint-hardeners, metal reinforcers, and so on. These are the poisons which, say the writs, killed Bill Frost, and are killing or crippling scores, if not hundreds, of others.

The government retorted that Turley's clients could not sue, since Area 51 did not exist, and because their allegations affected national security.

In the hearings, a solitary Turley is ranged against teams of government lawyers. "The argument", he summarises, "is that these men cannot have a lawyer since any discussion of their work at Area 51 violates security laws. The government has used national security as a legal defence, to stifle the case, gag the media and retaliate".

Turley won the first round. The court ruled that national security did not trump environmental laws under which the plaintiffs were suing. Then the government alleged that the case papers contained classified information about the construction site. It demanded that Turley hand over the documents, despatching air force personnel to his office.

When he refused, it called for a sealed hearing, assuring the public that it had only sought to ask him to hand the papers over voluntarily. This was a lie: It later emerged that the authorities were seeking in closed hearings to compel Turley to hand them over on pain of contempt and imprisonment.

Judge Philip Pro in Nevada ruled earlier this year that a civil court was not the appropriate place for an order resulting in the incarceration of an attorney over an issue of national security. But he expressly cleared the way for the government to initiate criminal proceedings against Turley for retention of classified material, punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

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