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March=BF20, 1998 Author: Blame NASA for high interest in UFOs

By MARTIN BURKEY
Times Aerospace/Science Writer
3/20/98

NASA doesn't advertise flying saucers as a space program spinoff, but the agency gets at least a share of the credit, the author of a book about UFOs said Thursday.

"The exploration of space makes reverse exploration seem reasonable," said Dr. Benson Saylor, professor of anthropology at Brandeis University in Massachusetts.

Saylor, author of "UFO Crash at Roswell, The Genesis of a Modern Myth", talked about the UFO "subcommunity" during a public lecture at the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

Asked why UFOs have become so popular in the face of contradictory, ambiguous or nonexistent evidence, Saylor suggested more people are searching for "enhancement, wonder, spirituality."

It also resonates strongly with recurring mythology, specifically the "hoarded object myth" in which some entity controls crucial resources and refuses to give it to humanity, Saylor said. In Greek mythology, the gods controlled fire until Prometheus stole fire and gave it to mortals. India has a similar myth about water, he said.

"In Roswell, the monster is the U.S. government, which controls the knowledge that we are not alone," said Saylor, who noted that he does not believe in UFOs.

Saylor said UFOs are used for "individual empowerment," a way for people to make themselves popular.

UFOs also are a vehicle for anti-government fears in the wake of Watergate and the Vietnam War, Saylor said. "Shaken confidence in government makes it seem more plausible. The government cant win this case."

The appeal of UFOs is also driven by docu-dramas and other media that make them seem more real, he added.

Polls indicate half of adults in the United States believe UFOs are real and there is intelligent life in the universe, Saylor said. Another 27 percent maintain alien ships have landed and have contacted humans.

Unlike true stories, like Watergate, which gradually unfolded around a handful of facts that didnt change, the Roswell incident and other UFO stories change or contradict themselves, Saylor said.

"Its not what you find in a journalistic expose," he said. "Its what you find in myths."

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