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Space Coast UFO Conference: NASA And Newsmedia

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For Oct. 10, 1998

NASA, news media rapped at UFO conference

By Billy Cox
FLORIDA TODAY

COCOA BEACH, Fla. - Although NASA made an easy target during Friday afternoon's opening session of the Space Coast UFO Conference at the Hilton, the most rousing applause erupted after a swipe at the news media.

Several hundred listeners gathered for an event billed as the NASA Forum, which - for the first time, according to conference sponsors - featured a space agency representative, Thomas Howard Smith.

But UFO researcher/author Stanton Friedman scored a crowd pleaser when he charged, during the question-and-answer session, "If any newspaper spent one-fifth of what they've spent (investigating) Monica Lewinsky, we'd have the answers to flying saucers."

Twenty years ago, Friedman, a nuclear physicist whose contracts included classified projects, was the first to investigate the 1947 accounts of a controversial crash in the New Mexico desert. Now popularized as the Roswell Incident, that event has become what Friedman contends was the beginning of a "Cosmic Watergate" engineered by the military and civilian intelligence machinery.

But with a NASA rep sitting at his elbow, Friedman couldn't resist venting some frustration at the space agency - "we don't have a project, we don't have goals" - and he wondered what happened to the UFO data supposedly collected by NASA's predecessor, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics.

Smith, a space station and human exploration specialist, preferred to talk about NASA's more conventional history and a discussion of upcoming projects. He described himself as a "sympathetic nonbeliever" who wasn't here "to deliver any kind of revelation. It would be fine.

It would also be career limiting," he added, provoking laughter.

Forum panelist Vincent DiPietro also had a major bone to pick with NASA. A senior systems engineer employed as a contractor at Goddard Space Flight Center for 23 years, DiPietro was the first to study enigmatic Martian surface features photographed during the 1976 Viking mission.

Citing a September Space News report on the growing number of planetary scientists disgruntled over the slow release of photo data from the ongoing Mars Global Surveyor project, DiPietro suggested compelling new images were being consciously withheld.

DiPietro criticized MGS camera operator Michael Malin, whose contract gives him a six-month proprietary embargo on the images. He said other scientists reported Malin had taken numerous pictures of the so-called Face on Mars, other than the single one released to NASA in April that appeared to reflect natural terrain rather than artificial features.

"This leads me to believe we are not getting all the facts from Malin Enterprises," DiPietro said.

But not all the barbs came from the panelists; the audience took their shots, too.

One man asked Smith a question he said he couldn't get NASA Administrator Dan Goldin to answer several years ago during a public forum: "When (are you) going to tell the public about the UFO presence?" The perplexed Smith replied, "The next time I play golf with him, I'll ask him."

Another exasperated audience member wondered where the space agency's curiosity was when it came to UFOs, given the level of public interest. "I've never heard a NASA official say, 'Y'know, this is interesting.' "

Friedman said the problem was with "ancient academics and fossilized physicists" and "a failure of leadership."

"It takes guts to say, 'I don't know' or, 'that's interesting,' as you suggest."

The Space Coast UFO Conference, sponsored by Project Awareness of Gulf Breeze, continues its lineup of speakers and workshops today and Sunday.

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