

Roswell: Clashing Visions of the Possible

By Michael Swords

Roswell is obviously a highly divisive topic in ufology. People accept or reject it, often emotionally, for reasons which seem to the listener unclear, even after patient attention. The possibility of a crashed disk, and the necessary astoundingly successful security required, alternatively violates or coheres with visions of reality held dear by the loudest, and occasionally less civil, discussants. But these deeper visions of reality, or what the writers and speakers of these schools want to believe, remain largely undescribed. This paper would like to pretend for the moment that such individuals and their constricting views of reality are not part of the serious Roswell exploration, as I believe they are not, no matter how much we are lumbered with them.

Instead, I would like to present a few thoughts on what is a more intriguing and potentially productive aspect of the Roswell debate: that intellectually honest and unprejudiced ufologists also differ markedly in their views about the crashed disk hypothesis, and what the mode of reality is that seems to be acceptable to some and not to others. I have sat around tables with reasonable people (and good friends) such as Mark Rodeghier and Tom Deuley, and listened as one researcher fails to convince another, and they end by amicably agreeing to disagree.

The main problem in these discussions between reasonable people has been the unique complexity of the Roswell case. Nothing in ufology has been remotely like it in terms of numbers of witnesses, variety and quality of researchers, fragmented information, and the lack of a comprehensive, clear research document to which all discussants can refer. Because of this complexity, perhaps no single researcher can wrap his mind completely around the case, and so all commentators work partly from ignorance. Whereas this situation should inspire humility in the intensity of conclusions, it unfortunately encourages the opposite in persons of strongly constricting visions of reality, and even muddies the exchanges between good, honest seekers of the truth.

Documents like the recent Air Force releases can appear to be reasonable to many people, only because of the case's complexity and the absence of a clear, comprehensive research document. This, and this alone, allows shoddy, incomplete research and "explanation" to address tiny elements of the case and pretend to address the entire complex. Some anti-Roswell ufologists have become masters of the "cut-a-branch-and-say-you-killed-the-tree" methodology. And Kent Jeffrey's recent change of mind about the case seems also influenced by this style of analysis. In many simpler UFO cases this approach might be reasonable. They are usually dependent upon very few elements. In the Roswell case, potshots and tree trimmings are important, but some humility and perspective should be applied when it comes to claiming what that trimming has actually done to the tree. In the real world, trimming often makes a tree healthier. Again, I want to emphasize that without a clear and comprehensive research document defining the case, no one, supporter or detractor, has a clear idea of what they're aiming at. My friends and colleagues, Kevin Randle and Donald Schmitt, wrote good books but not this sort of document. That was not their intent in made-for-the-public publications. We are still looking for the research-usable publication from some source, however.

Because I cannot unravel the whole Roswell case in an article (due mainly to my patchy

understanding of the details, let alone the length it would take), I would like to present what I believe to be the general hypothetical model that the reasonable pro-crash researchers are working with, and examine its strength and weakness. The pro-crash researchers base their views strongly in the historical context of the UFO phenomenon of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The anti-crash researchers seem to base their views in a different historical context: not UFOs, but their view of the way government and the military "should really work."

What ingredients interest the pro-crash researchers from which they build their working hypothesis? The first stone is really the foundation stone, and surprisingly almost never enters the discussion: that there was a huge wave of flying disk sightings being reported all over the country in the summer of 1947, and which continued intermittently as essentially the same phenomenon through 1952. This outbreak of anomalous aerial events was apparently well-witnessed and very convincing to those who studied it. What were they convinced of? That these were flying disks; technical craft performing beyond our own capabilities of the time, and of a very unusual configuration. Almost every discussion of the Roswell event skips lightly over this UFO context, and most begin talking as if the report were to be properly viewed as an isolated event.

This apparently stems from the time-honored tendency in UFO research to view each case separately and to admit that X never can prove Y. This, of course, is true. But at the same time, X very often can form a relevant context for Y, and make of Y a reasonable working hypothesis. This seems to me to be important in the sociology of the discussion. Accepting that Y is a reasonable working hypothesis due to its context in the 1947 wave, would take some of the ridicule and attack-dog mentality out of the discussion at the beginning. "I can see where you're coming from, but here's where I disagree." Perhaps, the debate could then proceed upon hypotheses, rather than ad hominem ("how could anyone be so foolish... etc."). And a second, perhaps unresolvable, concern: We should generally be more willing to credit the context of individual cases in ufology. As long as everyone insists on fighting every case in isolation to the death, there will never be any ufology. A field of study is always composed of a whole constellation of related or potentially related phenomena, for which there exist theories and working models which organize the pieces, have a remembered history, and direct subjective discussion. Our pseudoufology tends to feature isolation, no memory or history, and subjective argument.

Every pro-crash researcher that I know well feels that there is strong evidence of a large wave of aerial anomalies taking place in 1947, and that a reasonable and strong hypothesis for this is that craft beyond our current technical capabilities were being seen. I am not certain that the anti-crash researchers (again, I am not speaking of debunkers or other intellectually dishonest writers) feel as strongly about the 1947 wave and key cases such as Kenneth Arnold, C. J. John, and E. J. Smith. For the pro-crash researcher, though, the wave and its several-year continuance of disks and radar reports form a powerful context within which the possibility of a crash is reasonable.

So what of the case itself? Lying on top of the foundation stone context are the three "columns" from which all the rest of the research on Roswell has sprung:

- A. The news story release by the air base that they had in fact captured a flying saucer;
- B. The testimony of Major Jesse Marcel, combined with his job responsibility,

qualifications, and presumed character; and

C. The several descriptions of the Brazel ranch debris and the site.

The news release. At least this is something no one doubts happened, and apparently no one doubts that it was ordered by the base commander. Pro-crash researchers view this in regard to the simplest hypothesis: the release meant what it said. Any other hypothesis is entertainable, but it must make a case for a not insignificant reinterpreting of the release. When the second release comes out denying the conclusions of the first, the roles of the pro- and anti- crash researchers are reversed, but, I believe, not equally. The first release clearly inspired the second. Almost as clearly, that "inspiration" came from somewhere off the base. In that sense, it is reasonable to view the first release as originating at the site which was in contact with the material in the fullest and most direct way; and the second release not. There is still much latitude for rationalization upon this either way, but the fact of the release exists, and the simplest hypothesis is that the commander meant it.

One can imagine that the commander issued this press release whimsically or without much thought or having even bothered to look at the materials and the facts themselves, but that sort of behavior too would require some major rationalizing or guesswork. I submit that it is not unreasonable to suppose that base commander Blanchard familiarized himself quite extensively with whatever information and materials he had available before composing his release. If so, one is left with the problem of how Blanchard could have looked over and handled whatever his personnel had brought in, and decided that it was a flying disk, if in fact it was nothing more than U.S. produced balloon technology? For the school-of-nothing- really-happened, one would hope that the required hypothesis of:

A. Blanchard didn't even look at the materials and still ordered an astounding release; or

B. Blanchard didn't think the stuff was really unusual, but wrote this anyway would be at least a little uncomfortable. And, in a civilized ufology, it would be nice to hear the anti-forces admit the discomfort, as, I believe, the reasonable pro-forces do when it comes to the "how could you keep that secret?" problem.

Major Jesse Marcel. Rightly or wrongly, pro-crash researchers view Major Marcel as a responsible and competent soldier, of good qualifications to distinguish between mundane balloon debris and something extraordinary, and of good character well beyond the creation of elaborate public hoaxes on potentially important matters. This characterization of Marcel may be in error, but, given his position in July 1947, some serious rationalization by counterviews must be made to cast him into a light of incompetence, irresponsibility, and/or dishonesty. Realizing how important Marcel is to the case has apparently spawned just such attempts to attack him.

I might add that the ad hominem attack is becoming a standard weapon in the arsenal of ufological debaters. In a field so dependent upon testimony and researcher competence and honesty, maybe one can understand this, but in today's climate it seems well out of control and terminally destructive. We have often seen that debunkers fall back on this as a last (vicious) line of defense: Father Gill messianically lording it over the "primitive," impressionable Papuans; Cash and Landrum trying to rip off the government for "faked" injuries; Levelland or Saucer inventing cases to boost

tourism. But perhaps we can do better as a community of cooperating colleagues. We have gone for years without good reason to doubt Jesse Marcel's character and competence. Now that the anti-forces recognize that the Roswell case is unlikely to fall as long as Major Marcel stands, we are seeing a variety of attempts to chop him down. Let us hope that this "analysis" is at least done civilly, honestly, sensitively.

The debris field and the debris. It is the (apparent) fact that not only Major Marcel but several persons saw the crash debris (piecemeal or at the ranch) and that the descriptions are roughly consistent. Some people describe a self-forming metal (crumple-up, uncrumple by itself) which, if real, would be extremely strange even now (even given Nitinol as its cousins), let alone in 1947. Marcel does not describe this. But even without the miracle fold-out metal, the debris seems very unusual for strength and lightness, and inconsistent with things like balloons and their instrument packages. The amount of debris stated to be at the ranch site also seems inconsistent with any balloon project.

Taking these three elements together in the historical context of the UFO wave, pro-crash researchers have reasoned this way:

1. There seem to have been a lot of reports of technological disk-shaped craft of superior aeronautical performance flying about.
2. Roswell Army Air Field's commander reported that he and the base had found a crashed one.
3. The head of base intelligence reported (many years later) that this was true and that it wasn't any balloon, and that as far as he could tell the material was unearthly.
4. The characteristics and amounts of the debris reported seem inconsistent with any known U.S. (or other) technical project which could have crashed there.

Conclusion. 'The Roswell event was a crashed non-terrestrial technology' is a reasonable working hypothesis.

A large amount of research and writing then exploded from there, as we all know. Some of the testimonies seemed to fit nicely with the hypothesis, some not. Everyone chose how and where they wanted to rationalize. But a second major debate front occurred. This was the anti-crash writers' context: How in the world could you have a real ET-Roswell, and also have the near-total silence from military, science, NASA et al, as if it never happened? The simple anti-answer: It didn't happen. Who knows what went on with the 1947 UFOs, the release, Marcel, and the debris, but it must have been mainly a packet of errors of some kind. This is not an unreasonable set of concerns, and it taxes the pro-crash researcher to model what could have happened. Here is a rough characterization of the pro-crash reality model vis-a-vis what happened post-crash and "cleanup."

The pro-crash view of the importance of the military gaining possession of materials from a piece of extraterrestrial technology is that this would be seen by the Pentagon immediately to be of highest importance and needing highest secrecy. Therefore, extreme precautions would be taken and plans made to place all aspects of this under such secrecy. Other than the mess at Roswell itself, this sort of plan should have been

doable, maybe easier than we know. There have been many secret projects kept very "dark," and many, apparently, with very few persons aware of what the whole picture was all about. I am reminded of the following situation from (roughly) the same era.

In 1954 Eisenhower was scared to death about the possibility of a surprise nuclear attack by the USSR. He had grave reasons for keeping his feelings and what he might do about this problem absolutely secret. Ike had an Office of Defense Management which contained a Science Committee with many of the nation's elite and war-tested scientists on board. He spoke to J. Robert Oppenheimer and the good doctor suggested this committee.

Normally Ike would have discussed such momentous matters with his National Security Council, but, in his mind, this was too big even for them. Science Committee bigwheels, James Conant of Harvard and James R. Killian of MIT, were called in. They suggested a special group of highest secrecy to make the necessary study. Its name was the Technological Capabilities Panel, and it was composed of an elite group of academics, industrialists, and the military. There were only 50 (or so) persons involved who knew what was going on, and they reported only to Ike.

The structure of the Panel was a Steering Committee with three Project Teams, plus a military advisory committee, and a "communications working group." I don't know what this latter was, but perhaps it was the "service" group which handled all the materials, documents, communiqué's, etc. for the big brains. When their study was done, Ike listened to their report without inviting his National Security Council to attend.

What the pro-Roswellians imagine is something like the model in Diagram 1: an unavoidably messy situation in the Roswell area, both physically and socially, which was "cleaned up" by whatever means available as quickly as possible. Lots of leaks and unauthorized knowledge would be part of that mess, and lots of leaks occurred as expected. Secondly, almost no one would have to be in the know at Fort Worth, and that would be easy to secure. Thirdly, almost no one (other than a few lab scientists) would have to be in the know at Wright Field (or wherever), and that would be easy to secure. The number of people in the Pentagon (and related D.C. scientists) would initially be a little messier, but the problem could be kicked far upstairs very quickly and generally organized and controlled. The vast majority of military, political, and intelligence functions would be left entirely out of this situation, as it would be imperative for them to go forward with their business as if we had nothing hot to hide. Only if anything of real technical importance ever emerged from the testing would a decision have to be made to "alter human history." That decision would not be a crude decision, but as subtle an "interference" as possible. All decisions made would be driven by security issues alone. None would be driven by "science" or desire to explore.

This sort of highest-level elite program and security is what the pro-crash people require (and feel would be reasonable) in order to deal with the post-cleanup research and information blackout on the crashed disk. They see this project as being set up in principle (i.e., minimizing the number of persons, even within the Pentagon or at the research labs, who would be exposed to the materials or information in any way which would be suggestive of their nonterrestrial provenance) immediately; and tightening the security to a narrower need-to-know group with time. This is why pro-crash researchers aren't shocked by highly placed intelligence officers (like General George , Schulgen or Colonel Howard McCoy) acting like they knew nothing about the reality of a crashed disk. People in their same positions weren't in on things like Ike's TC Panel; small elite

extra-secret projects can be extremely selective, and should be. In analogy to the TCP, if there were only about 50 persons in the know totally, who would they be? There were only about a half-dozen military in Ike's group. The bulk were the Conants and Killians of the country.

This scenario seems unacceptable to the anti-crash researchers. They (apparently) feel that either:

A. You couldn't form this program effectively; or

B. Leaks would occur all over the place in time; or

C. Certain persons should have been in on this no matter how elite it was and that those persons (in their opinion) didn't act as if they were in on the secret.

Well, who really is to say? Without documentation either way this falls apart into another rationalization debate. As a person who tends to defend the reasonability of the ET-hypothesis for Roswell, I will (without grave claims of certitude) offer this:

A. It seems to me that the military, CIA, et al., have formed all sorts of extremely effective secrecy programs, and had ready-made secret labs at Wright-Patterson T-3 Engineering (and elsewhere) immediately available to lock almost anything up tight.

B. Same answer as above, regarding "leaks." I would add that although no catastrophic leaks have occurred other than Major Marcel himself, a case could be made for a slow but steady number of minor leaks occurring over the whole 50-year period.

C. And as for who should or should not have been in the inner circle, that is guesswork, and I haven't heard many compelling arguments that any one person lower than someone like Vandenburg absolutely had to be part of this. To speak to the case of one of my favorite guys, Colonel Howard McCoy of Wright Patterson's T-2 intelligence division: As bright a guy as Mack was, he was the wrong guy for this task. His division was for analyzing intelligence reports, not testing metals and materials, or even biological specimens. I realize that many reasonable people will not be able to accept this sort of scenario, but we should (I believe) accept one another's viewpoint to the extent that we recognize where we're coming from, and admit that neither side knows what the upper echelons of the Pentagon would do or were capable of doing in the face of such a problem.

Schools of thought on Roswell are numerous, and every person seems to have his own unique take on it. I believe that it is informative, however, to break the schools of people who have an opinion down into four: the extra positive (X+), the positive (+), the negative (-), and the extra negative (X-) The extra positive and extra negative schools write and speak as if they have concretely made up their minds, and that there's nothing any longer to be said except monitor one another and release occasional nuclear volleys. Maybe something can come of this sort of behavior, but I doubt it. Almost by definition, concrete does not meditate, grow, and evolve. Unfortunately for most of us and the public, these nuclear volleys are all we tend to hear. They polarize the issue so strongly, and create false impressions of the unity of all elements of testimony at play, that people begin to see the case as an all-or-nothing situation (accept everything that I believe or none of it). Even worse, some people get the

impression that the entirety of ufology is riding on the ease, a peculiar notion only explainable by watching too much pop media.

But more quietly, positive and negative individuals try to discuss the issues with more give and take and civility to their colleagues. We need to hear more of this sort of exchange and less from bomb-throwers.

In my observation of these debates (the saner sides of them anyway), the responsible anti-crash discussants cannot buy the level of secrecy and selectiveness of need-to-know personnel required by the pro-crash people to understand Pentagon and Project Sign behavior. They, therefore, doubt the crash evidence.

The responsible pro-crash discussants begin by being impressed with the debris-related testimonies, and therefore are led to imagine secrecy scenarios of an extreme nature. I believe that the pro-crash researchers (like pro UFO researchers) tend to trust testimony, especially when it is corroborated somehow, and the anti-crash persons do not. Also, the pro-crash side tends to see the case as a large constellation of many elements, and the anti-crash side tends to isolate bits, pick away at them, and, sometimes, forget case elements which are less easy targets.

My article has had the goal of clarifying a little of the different worlds that even good UFO scholars live in when it comes to Roswell. In my opinion there has never been a good focused debate on critical aspects of this ease, nor a research resource that would make such a debate feasible. But it's something that the serious people in the field need to do if the status of the crash event is ever to be made more understandable to any of us and to the history of our field. We need a workshop of rational and respectful give-and take on this ease, and a solid research document on case elements and their sources to emerge from it. Is anyone interested?

Editor's Note: Michael D. Swords is professor of natural sciences at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, and a former editor of the *Journal of UFO Studies*. Article from the *International UFO Reporter*, Fall 1997, Volume 22, Number 3

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