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GAO (*The Government Accountability Office*) Investigating Report That Government Covered Up '47 UFO Incident The Outer Limits: Conspiracy theorists think that a flying saucer crashed in New Mexico, killing all aboard

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Where television's "Unsolved Mysteries" has tried and failed, the General Accounting Office is unafraid to venture.

At the request of Rep. Steven H. Schiff (R-N.M.), Congress' investigative branch has launched a study to determine whether the government covered up a story alleging that the bodies of alien space voyagers were removed from a crashed flying saucer found near Roswell, N.M., in 1947.

After the purported crash of the spacecraft, the bodies of the extraterrestrial visitors were said by a local undertaker and other conspiracy theorists to have been autopsied and then secretly flown to an Air Force base in Ohio.

Even though the "Roswell incident" has been repeatedly dismissed by the Defense Department as nothing more than UFO fantasies triggered by the discovery of a downed weather balloon, the GAO has begun searching for documents to prove allegations that the Air Force "suppressed" information sought by Schiff.

Schiff is a member of the House Government Operations Committee, which oversees the GAO.

GAO spokeswoman Laura A. Kopelson said the office's investigation, first reported in the Albuquerque Journal earlier this month, stemmed from a meeting in October between Schiff and GAO Comptroller General Charles A. Bowsher. Schiff complained then that the Defense Department had been "unresponsive" to his inquiries about the 1947 incident.

"As far as I know, only one investigator had been assigned" to the case so far, Kopelson said, adding that not enough work had been done to report any results to Schiff. At another point, Kopelson said, "The people doing it are either on sick leave or are unavailable."

She said that there was no way of estimating how much the investigation would cost, and that the GAO does not release such information anyway.

The GAO conducted 1,380 inquiries into government operations in 1992. Its budget has risen from \$46.9 million in 1965 to \$490 million last year. The agency has been criticized, especially by Republicans, as the “lap dog of the requesters,” producing reports that tend to support whatever conclusion the requesting member of Congress suggests.

Kopelson said Schiff had asked the GAO “to see if there is any evidence that information regarding UFOs had been suppressed” after the Roswell incident.

Schiff, however, said that at a routine October meeting he had merely complained about the Defense Department's lack of responsiveness. But a GAO official said, “We're willing to take a stab at it.”

Schiff, in a telephone interview from Albuquerque, said that last March, after receiving inquiries from “UFO believers” and some Roswell residents who were in the military in 1947, he wrote to Defense Secretary Les Aspin asking for more information about the reported spacecraft crash and the alleged disappearance of the aliens' bodies.

The crash 75 miles northwest of Roswell of a mysterious object, which the Air Force said was a weather balloon equipped with a radar-reflecting device, was the subject of several books and remains many UFO buffs' greatest riddle.

A privately owned museum in Roswell contains a number of documents and photographs purporting to prove the existence of the aliens. It also displays a re-creation of the spacecraft surrounded by figures portraying the dead extraterrestrials.

UFO buffs contend the incident marked the beginning of a government conspiracy to suppress evidence of alien life.

Much of the speculation stems from claims by William Haut, a former Air Force public affairs officer, who said that on July 2, 1947, he was told to prepare a news release reporting that the Air Force had recovered parts of a flying saucer and then was told to change the story to report a weather balloon.

Also, a nurse reportedly told a local funeral home director that she witnessed the autopsies of the spacemen, whom she described as having oversized heads and beetle-like features. The nurse subsequently died in a plane crash.

After the autopsies, conspiracy theorists said the bodies were flown to Ft. Worth, Tex., and then to what is now Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio.

In 1989, NBC's "Unsolved Mysteries" investigated the controversy, which the program's host, Robert Stack, concluded remained unsolved.

Schiff said that after calling Aspin last March to request a Defense Department briefing on the Roswell incident, he received a call from an Air Force lieutenant colonel, who brusquely told him the documents had been turned over to the National Archives.

But, Schiff said, Archives officials told him they did not have the records on Roswell, even though they did have records of "Project Blue Book," a 1969 Air Force study of reported UFO sightings. That study, Schiff said, did not deal with the Roswell case.

"I was getting pretty upset at all the running around," Schiff said, adding that at his meeting with GAO officials, "they made an offer to help."

"Generally, I'm a skeptic on UFOs and alien beings, but there are indications from the runaround that I got that whatever it was, it wasn't a balloon. Apparently, it's another government cover-up," Schiff said.

He called the Defense Department's lack of response "astounding" and said government accountability was an issue "even larger than UFOs."

Asked if the GAO might not be extending itself, Schiff acknowledged that the agency "usually does fiscal investigations, and at present I can't find a fiscal impact" in the Roswell incident.

Had the agency said, " 'This is beyond our realm of expertise,' " Schiff said, "I wouldn't insist on it."

He added, "If the Defense Department had been responsive, it wouldn't have come to this."

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