THE ROSWELLIAN

An analysis of four classic flying-saucer incidents reveals how debunking can send a mundane case underground, where it is transformed by mythologizing processes, then reemerges—like a virulent strain of a virus—as a vast conspiracy tale. Defined by the Roswell Incident (1947), this syndrome is repeated at Flatwoods (1952), Kecksburg (1965), and Rendlesham Forest (1980).

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SYNDROME

HOW SOME UFO MYTHS DEVELOP

Near the very beginning of the modern UFO craze, in the summer of 1947, a crashed "flying disc" was reported to have been recovered near Roswell, New Mexico. However, it was soon identified as simply a weather balloon, whereupon the sensational story seemed to fade away. Actually, it went underground; after subsequent decades, it resurfaced as an incredible tale of extraterrestrial invasion and the government's attempt to cover up the awful truth. The media capitalized on "the Roswell incident," and conspiracy theorists, persons with confabulated memories, outright hoaxers, and others climbed aboard the bandwagon.

We identify this process—a UFO incident's occurring, being debunked, going underground, beginning the mythmaking processes, and reemerging as a conspiracy tale with ongoing mythologizing and media hype—as the Roswellian Syndrome. In the sections that follow, we describe the process as it occurred at Roswell and then demonstrate how the same syndrome developed from certain other famous UFO incidents: at Flatwoods, West Virginia (1952); Kecksburg, Pennsylvania (1965); and Rendlesham Forest (outside the Woodbridge NATO base) in England (1980). Between us, we have actually been on-site to investigate three of the four cases (Joe Nickell at Roswell and Flatwoods, and James McGaha—a former military pilot—at Rendlesham).

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Roswell (1947)

Here is how the prototype of the Roswellian Syndrome began and developed:

Incident. On July 8, 1947, an eager but relatively inexperienced public information officer at Roswell Army Airfield issued a press release claiming a "flying disc" had been recovered from its crash site on an area ranch (Berlitz and Moore 1980; Korff 1997). The next day's *Roswell Daily Record* told how rancher "Mac" Brazel described (in a reporter's words) "a large area of bright wreckage" consisting of tinfoil, rubber strips, sticks, and other lightweight materials.

Debunking. Soon after these initial reports, the mysterious object was identified as a weather balloon. Although there appears to have been no attempt to deceive, the best evidence now indicates that the device was really a balloon array (the sticks and foiled paper being components of dangling box-kite–like radar reflectors) that had gone missing in flight from Project Mogul.

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Mogul represented an attempt to use the airborne devices' instruments to monitor sonic emissions from Soviet nuclear tests. Joe Nickell has spoken about this with former Mogul Project scientist Charles B. Moore, who identified the wreckage from photographs as consistent with a lost Flight 4 Mogul array. (See also Thomas 1995; Saler et al. 1997; U.S. Air Force 1997.)

Submergence. With the report that the "flying disc" was only a balloon-borne device, the Roswell news story ended almost as abruptly as it had begun. However, the event would linger on in the fading and recreative memories of some of those involved, while in Roswell rumor and speculation continued to simmer just below the surface with UFO reports a part of the culture at large. In time, conspiracy-minded UFOlogists would arrive, asking leading questions and helping to spin a tale of crashed flying saucers and a government cover-up.

Mythologizing. This is the most complex part of the syndrome, beginning when the story goes underground and continuing after it reemerges, developing into an elaborate myth. It involves many factors, including exaggeration, faulty memory, folklore, and deliberate hoaxing.

For example, exaggeration played a large role in the Roswell case. Major Jesse Marcel, who had helped retrieve the wreckage, often made self-contradictory and inflated assertions, giving, for example, grossly exaggerated statements about the amount of debris, its supposed imperviousness to damage, and other matters. It is now known that Marcel made claims about his own background—that he had a college degree, was a World War II pilot who had received five air medals for shooting down enemy planes, and had himself been shot down—that were proved untrue by his own service file (Fitzgerald 2001, 511). Kal Korff (1997, 27), who uncovered many of Marcel's deceptions, found him "exaggerating things and repeatedly trying to 'write himself' into the history books." As he described the debris, Marcel said the sticks resembled balsa but were "not wood at all" and had "some sort of hieroglyphics on them that nobody could decipher" (apparently referring to the floral designs). As well, there were "small pieces of a metal like tinfoil, except that it wasn't tinfoil" (Berlitz and Moore 1980, 65).

Faulty memory was another problem. For example, Curry Holden, an anthropologist from Texas Tech, claimed a student archaeological expedition he led had actually come upon the crashed flying saucer and the bodies of its extraterrestrial crew. Holden's wife and daughter, however, insisted that he had never told *them* of such an event; neither was there any corroboration in his personal papers. Holden was ninety-six when he provided his account to UFOlogist Kevin Randle, at which time his wife told Randle her husband's memory "wasn't as sharp as it once had been. He sometimes restructured his life's events, moving them in time so that they were subtly changed" (Fitzgerald 2001, 514). Roswell mortician W. Glenn Dennis, who provided information on alien "bodies" at the Roswell AAF Hospital, also seriously misremembered and confabulated[1] events. According to James McAndrew's *The Roswell Report: Case Closed* (U.S. Air Force 1997, 78–79), Dennis's account "was compared with official records of the actual events he is believed to have described" and showed "extensive inaccuracies" that included "a likely error in the date by as much as twelve years."

The processes that create folklore also played a role in shaping the Roswell legend. As reported in Leonard Stringfield's book *Situation Red: The UFO Siege* (1977), a great number of tales proliferated about an alleged crash of an extraterrestrial craft and the retrieval of its humanoid occupants. The many versions of the story—what folklorists call variants—are proof of the legend-making, oral-tradition process at work. The aliens were typically described as little, big-eyed, big-headed humanoids, a type that began to be popularly reported after they were described by "abductees" Betty and Barney Hill in 1961 (Nickell 2011, 184–86). The pickled corpses were secretly stored—mostly anonymous sources claimed—at a (nonexistent) hangar-18 at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, or some other location subsequently supposed to be Area 51 (the U.S. government's secret test facility). From a folkloristic point of view, the crash/retrieval stories seem to function as "belief tales," that is, legends told to give credence to a folk belief—in this instance a burgeoning one (Nickell 1995, 196–97).

Roswell folklore was obviously fed in part by deliberate fakelore. Related hoaxing began in 1949 when—as a part of the forthcoming sci-fi movie *The Flying Saucer* (1950)—an actor posing as an FBI agent avowed its claim of a captured spacecraft was true. In 1950, writer Frank Scully reported in his *Behind the Flying Saucers* that the U.S. government possessed three Venusian spaceships complete with humanoid corpses. Scully got his information from a pair of confidence men who were hoping to sell a petroleum-locating gadget allegedly derived from alien technology. By 1974, a man named Robert Spencer Carr was giving talks in which he claimed firsthand knowledge of where the preserved aliens were hidden; however, the late claimant's son reported that his father made up the entire yarn. Other Roswell hoaxes included the ineptly forged "MJ-12 documents" (that continue to fool UFOlogist Stanton T. Friedman); a diary that told how a family came upon the smoldering crashed saucer and injured aliens (but was written with an ink not manufactured until 1974); and the notorious "Alien Autopsy" film, showing the dissection of a rubbery extraterrestrial who appeared to be from the distant Planet Latex (Nickell 2001, 118–21).

Reemergence and Media Bandwagon Effect. In 1980 the story resurfaced in the media with publication of the book *The Roswell Incident*. Its authors were Charles Berlitz (who had previously written the mystery-mongering best seller *The Bermuda Triangle*, containing "invented details," exaggerations, and distortions [Randi 1995, 35]) and William L. Moore (who was a suspect in the previously mentioned "MJ-12" hoax [Nickell with Fischer, 1992, 81–105], as well as author of *The Philadelphia Experiment*, an expanded version of another's tale that itself proved to be a hoax [Clark 1998, 509]). *The Roswell Incident*'s book jacket gushed: "Reports indicate, before government censorship, that occupants and material from the wrecked ship were shuttled to a CIA high security area—and that there may have been a survivor!" It adds that ". . . Berlitz and Moore uncover astonishing information that indicates alien visitations may actually have happened—only to be hushed up in the interest of 'national security.'"

The book is replete with distortions. Consider rancher Mac Brazel's original description of the scattered debris he found on his ranch—strips of rubber, sticks, tinfoil, tough paper, and tape with floral designs (Nickell 2009, 10)—the same as shown in photos (U.S. Air Force 1997, 7) and consistent with a Mogul balloon array with radar reflectors. However, Berlitz and Moore impose a conspiratorial interpretation, saying that in a subsequent interview Brazel "had obviously gone to great pains to tell the newspaper people exactly what the Air Force had instructed him to say regarding how he had come to discover the wreckage and what it looked like." In fact, Brazel quite outspokenly insisted, "I am sure what I found was not any weather observation balloon," and he was right: the debris was from a Project Mogul array, much of it foiled paper from the radar targets (Berlitz and Moore 1980, 40).

Berlitz's and Moore's *The Roswell Incident* launched the modern wave of UFO crash/retrieval conspiracy beliefs, promoted by additional books (e.g., Friedman and Berliner 1992), television shows, and myriad other venues. Roswell conspiracy theories were off and running, typically linked to strongly anti–U.S. government attitudes. The Roswellian Syndrome would play out again and again.

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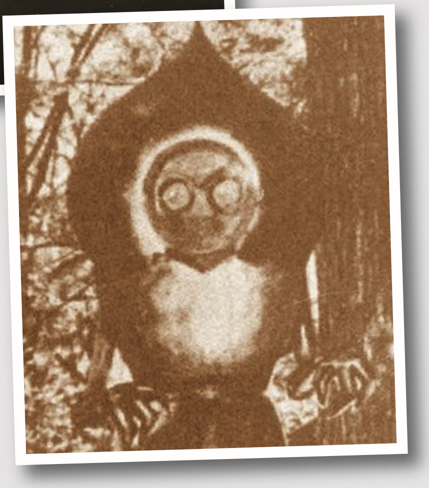

Flatwoods (1952)

About 7:15 PM on September 12, 1952, at the tiny village of Flatwoods, Braxton County, West Virginia, some boys on the school playground saw a fiery UFO apparently land on a hilltop. Running to a nearby home, they obtained a flashlight and were joined by a beautician, her two sons, and a dog. As the unlikely group went up the hill toward a pulsating light, one boy aimed a flashlight at a pair of eyes shining through the dark. The group saw a tall "manlike" entity with a round face surrounded by a "pointed hood-like shape." Suddenly the monster emitted a high-pitched hissing sound and swept at them with "a gliding motion as if afloat in midair," while exhibiting "terrible claws." The group ran in panic, and the next day skid marks and a black gunk were found at the site (Nickell 2000).

The incident attracted journalists, writers (like paranormalist Ivan Sanderson), and apparently two Air Force investigators in civilian clothes. Soon, the UFO was identified as a meteor; seen in three states, it had only *appeared* to land when it disappeared behind the hill. The pulsating light was obviously one of three airplane beacons in view at the site. The tall "monster" was believed to have been a large owl on a limb (since then, more evidentially determined to have been a barn owl [Nickell 2000]), and a local man identified the ground traces as caused by his pickup truck and its leaking oil pan. The case soon slipped into obscurity.

Fifteen years elapsed, then Sanderson included the case as Chapter 3 of his *Uninvited Visitors* (1967). The credulous Sanderson (once fooled by a rubber Sasquatch frozen in ice [Nickell 2011, 87–90]) opined that the Flatwoods incident involved multiple UFOs—citing contradictory accounts of, in each instance, a *single* object. Instead of suspecting that witnesses were mistaken or that the meteor might have broken apart, he insisted that "to be logical" we should believe that there was "a flight of aerial machines" that were "maneuvering in formation." For some reason they lost control, but one managed to land at Flatwoods. Its pilot emerged "in a space suit" but, observed, headed back to the craft, which—like two others that "crashed"—soon "vaporized" (Sanderson 1967, 37–52).

Sanderson was followed in 2004 by Frank C. Feschino Jr., who published—with an introduction and epilogue by Stanton T. Friedman—*The Braxton County Monster: The Cover-Up of the Flatwoods Monster Revealed.* Feschino interviewed elderly witnesses, who, according to the book's promotional copy, "wanted to talk about the story for the first time in fifty years." For example, Kathleen May, the beautician who was with the boys when they encountered the "monster" in 1952, recalled a mysterious "government" letter that had been shown her by local reporter A. Lee Stewart Jr. She claimed it told of experimental craft the "Navy Department" operated in the area the evening of the incident. Feschino huffs: "The test ship explanation told to Mrs. May in the mysterious letter was not even remotely possible in 1952. The Air Force knew that Mrs. May did not see a meteor in Flatwoods. So they convinced her that it was something explicable, like an experimental ship. But there were no experimental ships in 1952!" (Feschino 2004, 336). Actually, according to reporter Stewart, what he had shown May was only a press release for an issue of *Collier's* magazine with an attached photo of a moon ship (Feschino 2004, 323–36).

Kecksburg (1965)

About forty miles southeast of Pittsburgh, in Kecksburg, Pennsylvania, on December 9, 1965, a boy playing outdoors saw an object plummet into nearby woods. In fact, a brilliant aerial object had been seen by numerous observers over a large area. The *Greensburg Tribune-Review* reported in its county edition of December 10, "Unidentified Flying Object Falls Near Kecksburg" and "Army Ropes Off Area." However, that newspaper's city edition headlined its story "Searchers Fail To Find Object" (Gordon 2001, 288). From photographs of the cloud train from the object, *Sky & Telescope* magazine (February 1966) identified it as a very bright meteor (a type of fireball known as a bolide). The story went underground.

The Kecksburg incident remained obscure until September 19, 1990, when it became the season opener for NBC's *Unsolved Mysteries*. The show launched the story as one of a crashed UFO, its secret retrieval, and a government conspiracy to hide the truth. Nearly a quarter of a century after the original incident, two local men had begun to claim that before authorities arrived they had entered the wooded area and encountered a large metallic object, shaped like an acorn, partially embedded in the earth. At the back of the object, the witnesses said, using wording that is curiously similar to that of the Roswell incident, were markings like ancient Egyptian "hieroglyphics." And, also like the Roswell case, the UFO was allegedly transported to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, where it was kept in a sealed building (Gordon 2001, 288–90). Such shared motifs (as folklorists call story elements) suggest the Kecksburg incident was influenced by the Roswell story. One source even claimed bodies were recovered at Kecksburg but subsequently retracted the claim (Young 1997).

The various later claims do not fare well, and more than fifty residents of Kecksburg sent a petition to *Unsolved Mysteries* attempting to forestall the broadcast. These included the fire chief in 1965, Ed Myers, and a couple, Valerie and Jerome Miller, whose home the TV show wrongly claimed had served as a "military command post" during the UFO recovery. Actually, both the Air Force and the state police reported the day after the incident that nothing had been discovered and that all that had been carried from the site was search equipment (Young 1997).

Rendlesham Forest (1980)

For three days in late December 1980 in East England, a series of UFO close-encounter incidents occurred in Rendlesham Forest, located between two British NATO bases—RAF Bentwaters and RAF Woodbridge—that were at the time being leased by the United States Air Force. The incidents began in the early morning of December 26 (although sources disagree, some giving December 25 or December 27) and lasted for three successive days. Security patrolmen witnessed a bright streaking light that appeared to crash into the forest. Investigating, the men soon saw lights they attributed to a UFO—a bright white light plus an apparent vehicle with "a pulsing red light on top" and "blue lights underneath." As the patrolmen proceeded closer, the object "maneuvered through the trees and disappeared" (Halt 1981). The following day, three seven-inch-diameter depressions were found at the site. That night "burn marks" were seen on trees, and radiation readings were also obtained. On an audiotape made by Deputy Base Commander Lt. Col. Charles Halt that same night, one hears an unidentified person call out regarding the bright light, "There it is again . . . there it is," with a five-second interval ("Rendlesham" 2011). Later that night "three starlike objects" were seen in the sky; one to the south, Halt (1981) said, "was visible for two or three hours and beamed down a stream of light from time to time" (Butler et al. 1984; Ridpath 1986; Hesemann 2001).

As we now know, a bolide (a brilliant meteor) streaked over southern England at the time of the first Rendlesham sighting. Subsequently, the Suffolk police investigated the initial sighting and determined that the only light visible from the area was that of the Orford lighthouse (Ridpath 1986). The Orford Ness beacon stood in the very direction airmen were looking and flashed at the same five-second interval reported for the UFO. Later, other claims were convincingly debunked: the red and blue lights were from a police car; the "landing" depressions were rabbit diggings; "burn marks" on pines were axe blazings oozing resin; the low radiation readings had been taken with equipment not intended to measure background radiation and were therefore meaningless; and the starlike lights were probably indeed stars, namely Sirius, Vega, and Deneb ("Rendlesham" 2011; Ridpath 1986). Meanwhile, the Rendlesham story remained unpublicized for almost three years.

In October 1983 the story leaked out and made headlines in the British tabloid *News of the World:* "UFO Lands in Suffolk—and That's Official." It was followed by a book, *Sky Crash: A Cosmic Conspiracy* (1984), written by Brenda Butler, Jenny Randles, and Dot Street and based in part on hypnosis sessions with "Art Wallace"—actually former U.S. Airman Larry Warren who was the *News of the World*'s in-

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formant. Warren's claim to have been a witness to the Rendlesham incident has been disputed by others, including Halt ("Rendlesham" 2011). By this time bizarre rumors had surfaced that a commander had met three little humanoid extraterrestrials who had emerged from the landed UFO, but the alleged contactee denied it (Butler et al. 1984, 86).

In time, Jenny Randles, who helped hype the Rendlesham incident, came to doubt the extraterrestrial connection, stating, "While some puzzles remain, we can probably say that no unearthly craft were seen in Rendlesham Forest. We can also argue with confidence that the main focus of the events was a series of misperceptions of everyday things encountered in less than everyday circumstances" (qtd. in "Rendlesham" 2011).

* * *

No doubt other instances of the Roswellian Syndrome could be given (even beyond UFO encounters), but the ones we have presented here are major examples of the type. Of course, each is different in its own way (for example, the Rendlesham Forest case had a much briefer period of submergence than did Roswell). And some famous UFO incidents—the Phoenix Lights of 1997, for instance (Davenport 2001)—have not followed the same course. (For one apparent reason, it did not involve a specific site on the ground visited by investigators.)

Nevertheless, we believe we have identified a genuine pattern in cases in which, during a period of submergence, the mythologizing tendency has been at work followed by a reemergence—rather like a new, more virulent strain of a virus. It appears that UFOlogists are always looking for a Holy Grail case to verify their belief in extraterrestrial visitation, and when that does not pan out (most UFO reports prove little more than misidentifications, ambiguous sightings, fake photos, and the like) they seek out the old cases and are rewarded with much more sensational testimony. By identifying and analyzing this process, we hope to promote more critical thinking regarding these and other sensationalized cases. ■

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Note

[1] Confabulation is a distortion of memory in which gaps in one's recollection are unintentionally filled in with fictional experiences (Goldenson 1970, I: 249).

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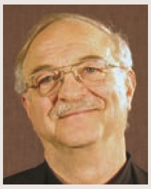

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