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The Roswell Myth in the FBI Files: Aliens, UFOs, and the Cold War

“The investigation of Unidentified Flying Objects is not and never has been a matter that is within the investigative jurisdiction of the FBI” (Redfern 9). Although in 1972 Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, explicitly denied that FBI had ever investigated extraterrestrial beings or unidentified flying objects, recently disclosed files point to the contrary. Shortly after World War II, the FBI in corroboration with the Army Air Force, CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and the State Department were involved in collecting evidence and interviewing witnesses who claimed to have seen or come in contact with UFOs.

In a Bureau Bulletin No. 42, Series 1947, Hoover ordered his subordinates: “You should investigate each instance which is brought to your attention of a sighting of a flying disc in order to ascertain whether or not it is a bona fide sighting, an imaginary one or a prank.” Cautioning that suspects might be motivated by desire for “personal publicity, causing hysteria or playing a prank,” Hoover described the procedure that had to be followed in informing Bureau top officials and the Army, should the investigation have merit. The Army Air Force guaranteed “the Bureau complete cooperation in these matters and in any instances where they fail to make information available to you or make the recovered discs available for your examination, it should promptly be brought to the attention of the Bureau” (*UFO File*, 1: 47).¹

J. Edgar Hoover turned his collection of secret files into a source of incredible power. He created an elite force of highly professional and like-thinking detectives who would aid the local police with their scientific methods of investigation, a vast collection of fingerprints, and files containing exclusive information on both criminals and radicals. Director Hoover, taught by his early experience in the Library of Congress, where he was in a position to observe the organizational work of such a famous empire builder as Herbert Putnam, must have been aware that the very access to controversial information,

¹ The following abbreviations are used in this essay: *Hoover's File* – Federal Bureau of Investigation: Freedom of Information Act. *Official Personnel File of J. Edgar Hoover*, *Roswell File* – Federal Bureau of Investigation: Freedom of Information Act. Unusual Phenomena Listing: *Roswell*; *UFO File* – Federal Bureau of Investigation: Freedom of Information Act. *Unidentified Flying Objects*.

impossible to be obtained by others, put him in a position of authority and gave him tremendous advantage over those who desired to come in its possession (Powers 39).

Hoover's secret collection of files on criminals, political dissidents, and his own adversaries reflected his almost indiscriminate reverence for facts. In his opinion, facts were evidence in themselves. That they carried different weight to different individuals and that they could be interpreted in different ways did not matter to the man who had in his possession information most desired by Presidents, Senators and Congressmen.² What mattered most was the way in which he saw events and people, and since there was only one interpretation possible, that is his own, he learnt how to lend authority to his opinions by presenting them not as his own beliefs, but as truths apparent to any serious and honest intelligence. By questioning Hoover's opinions, his adversaries were exposing themselves as disloyal and skeptical about the basic principles of democratic society and American values.

The dramatic increase in Hoover's power resulted from his success in using wartime and postwar concerns about internal security threat posed by foreign-dominated fascist and Communist movements. An increased FBI presence was necessary to apprehend

² Here is what Hoover's close aide Cartha DeLoach writes about politicians' interest in the FBI files and about Hoover's attitude:

In the late summer of 1964, shortly after Barry Goldwater had won the Republican presidential nomination, Walter Jenkins asked me to come to the White House and talk over a matter he didn't want to discuss on the telephone. When I heard what he had to say, I understood why.

"We want whatever information you have in your files on Barry Goldwater's staff. Not just his senatorial staff, but his campaign staff as well."

"Why?" I asked him, as innocently as I knew how.

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"The Boss wants to know who he's up against."

I raised my eyebrows.

"I'll see what we've got and let you know."

I went back over to the FBI headquarters and asked to see the director. When I told him about Jenkin's request, he was clearly upset.

"This is going too far," he said. "The operation in Atlantic City involved a potential national security matter, even though we knew what the White House wanted from us. But this is pure politics."

"No doubt about it," I said.

Hoover shook his head.

"We can't do it."

I nodded in agreement.

"Why don't we just tell them we don't have any of Goldwater's staff in our files?" I suggested.

Hoover agreed, and after a day or two I called Walter and told him we'd drawn a blank. He thanked me for checking and said he'd pass the information along to the president. I waited for a call from Johnson himself, But it never came. Maybe he believed me, or maybe with the election all but in the bag he just didn't want to push Hoover too far. (9-10)

spies and saboteurs, and to anticipate and frustrate the efforts of enemy spy agencies and their recruits. In the process, investigating criminals became secondary and law enforcement was abandoned as the FBI efforts focused on containing “subversives” by extralegal methods, like the “Black Bag Jobs”³ (*Hoover’s File*, 3b: 47). After 1936, the FBI activities shifted from law enforcement to the collection of “intelligence.” The principal target of the FBI investigations – even after the United States became a military ally of the Soviet Union against the fascist powers of Germany, Italy and Japan – became American Communists, left-wing trade unionists, and political activists. After Hoover’s reports that the Communists had got control of the three major trade unions, the International Longshoremen, the United Mine Workers, and the Newspaper Guild, and that they would be able to paralyze the country, President F. D. Roosevelt requested further analysis of the situation, stressing the need for keeping the whole investigation confidential (Cox and Theoharis 152).

Partly on President Roosevelt’s request, partly out of his own initiative, Hoover transformed his Bureau into an intelligence arm of the White House, informing the President on the “subversive activities” of his foreign policy critics. The espionage and sabotage cases arose little of his interest but he was more preoccupied with the plans and tactics of the isolationists who opposed the FDR’s drive to amend the neutrality laws or authorize Lend-Lease. Director Hoover sought to ingratiate himself with a sympathetic President by providing detailed reports on the plans and thoughts of officials working in German, Italian, Vichy French, and Russian embassies in Washington. The information was acquired through electronic surveillance. Despite the Soviet-U.S. alliance, after 1941 the FBI continued to monitor the activities of the American Communist party leaders, acquiring information through illegal wiretaps, bugs, break-ins, mail-opening, and interception of international messages. Hoover’s regular reports to the White House offered no evidence of Communist espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union but instead recounted the source and dollar amount of the Soviet funding of the U.S. Communist party as well as party officials’ reactions to the President’s foreign policy decisions and his policies regarding strikes and labor disputes (Powers 244).

That shift in the FBI’s role after 1936 was not publicly known. Intelligence about dissident political activities was quietly disseminated to the White House, the State, Justice, and Treasury departments as well as the military intelligence agencies. Although the war effort did not benefit much from that information, it did alert senior federal officials to the political

³ The document concerning the “Black Bag Jobs” was part of a secret filing procedure, “Do Not File,” established by Hoover in 1942, which was to ensure that sensitive memoranda were kept out of the Bureau’s central records system at headquarters. Single copies of such memoranda were prepared, and the FBI Director alone decided on their disposition.

plans and strategies of right wing and left wing political activists. Because the FBI had obtained much of that information illegally, even the evidence of the Soviet funding could not be used to prosecute the American Communist party leadership. But if Hoover was unable to exploit the FBI's discoveries about Communists and their left-liberal allies during the war years, the accumulated information acquired greater value after 1945, in the changed political climate of the Cold War.

Convinced that American radicals, not only the Communist party members, threatened national security, in February 1946 Hoover launched a campaign to alert the general public to the threat posed by the Communist party and by the support the Party received from liberal sources and from its connections in the labor unions. That covered program relied upon carefully prepared educational material, and aimed at influencing public opinion in such a way as to guarantee success in a future campaign against radicals. The educational campaign was launched without the knowledge and authorization of the Truman administration, and it soon expanded in scope and purpose, embracing covert, informal assistance to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, notably during its highly publicized hearings of 1947-1948 into Communist influence in Hollywood, and in the wake of Whittaker Chambers' charges against Alger Hiss. The FBI also provided assistance and advice to Senator Joseph McCarthy, dating from March 1950, and participated in a formal liaison program with the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee from February 1951. A code-named Responsibilities Program also began in 1951. Under that program information was leaked to governors and state officials as well as to carefully selected, favored reporters, columnists, and editors. The culmination of those separate but interrelated activities was the inception of a formal Mass Media program and the now infamous COINTELPROs in the 1950's. With the COINTELPROs, the FBI officials moved beyond dissemination to aggressively harass and discredit targeted radical organizations: the Communist party; the Socialist Workers party; white supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan; black nationalist organizations, such as the Black Panthers; and the New Left (Churchill and Wall 91-230).

The FBI's various dissemination activities marked a definite shift from law enforcement to political containment. All FBI activities, such as purging suspected radicals from the federal bureaucracy under the Federal Employee Loyalty Program, persecuting Communist leaders under the Smith Act, or prosecuting the accused spies: Alger Hiss, William Remington, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were to alert the public to the seriousness of the Red Menace. In the process, Hoover circumvented the constitutional limitations on the FBI investigative practices. He demanded and gained confidentiality for the FBI sources in the administration of the loyalty program, and in that way he succeeded in laundering illegally obtained information, which was used to effect the dismissal of radical and Popular Front liberals from the federal bureaucracy. Federal loyalty review board hearings did not con-

form to the rules of evidence of judicial proceedings, so that defendants could not directly challenge the credibility of their accusers or question whether evidence had been illegally obtained.

The FBI did not secure the indictment of Communist leaders for espionage but for violating the vague standards of the so-called Smith Act – the participation in a conspiracy to overthrow the United States government by force or violence. Since the information that the American Communist party received funds from the Soviet Union was obtained through wiretaps, bugs and break-ins, the FBI introduced informers who offered uncorroborated testimony about the plans and purposes of their leaders. The FBI briefs were also based on a slanted analysis of Communist publications, ideological evidence, and suspect associations, sufficient to produce successful trials for the FBI in the climate of suspicion and fear of the Cold War.

In 1947, the year of the Roswell incident, the United States was preparing for a war. A year before Winston Churchill gave his famous “Iron Curtain Speech” in Fulton, and in March 1947 President Truman announced his doctrine, which became the declaration of Cold War. At the beginning of 1947, at the home front, another organization was fighting Communists and subversives, creating an atmosphere of hostility and suspicion. The House Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities turned to examining Communist influences in Hollywood. J. Edgar Hoover as a close collaborator to that Committee willingly provided damaging information about Communist ties of his political enemies. Americans were deeply convinced that the responsibility for keeping America safe from hostile foreign influences rested on the Director of the FBI.

Not surprisingly, once the news of the crash of a “flying saucer” near Roswell broke out on July 22, 1947, Hoover received the following communication:

Flying disc. Information concerning. Eighth Air Force, telephonically advised this office that an object purporting to be a flying disc was recovered near Roswell, New Mexico, this date. The disc is hexagonal in shape and was suspended from a balloon by cable, which balloon was approximately twenty feet in diameter. ... further advised that the object found resembles a high altitude weather balloon with a radar reflector, but that telephonic conversation between their office and right field had not borne out this belief. Disc and balloon being transported to right field by special plane for examination. Information provided this office because of national interest in case and fact that National Broadcasting Company, Associated Press, and other attempting to break story of location of disc today. ... advised would request right field to advise Cincinnati office results of examination. No further investigation being conducted. (*Roswell File 1*)

Throughout the years the Roswell incident grew into a myth. What in fact was a crash of a balloon carrying high altitude radar equipment for detecting Russian atomic bomb experiments started to be perceived by many as a crash landing of extraterrestrial beings on Earth. Since 1947, the government has conducted extensive investigation of the incident, and more than one-quarter of American adults have become convinced that aliens have visited the Earth. Countless film productions have told and retold the story of Roswell basing their plots on historical facts and pure fantasy. However, what is interesting is not the viability of UFO allegations, but rather what the Roswell myth or other UFO sightings can tell us about American society in the context of its Cold War experience as seen through FBI files.

Although the FBI was not involved in the investigation of the Roswell incident, in fact Hoover received a number of letters from concerned citizens and memoranda from his own field officers reporting on various sightings of flying discs in terms of national security. One such citizen wrote⁴:

Doesn't it seem wisest for you to forbid papers – (No not forbid – but ask the cooperation of all papers) to keep all news of those discs out of the news until you are sure just what they are & where from.

Seems to us with all the enemies we have, even within our borders, it could be something far more important than may seem at first. I had two sons in this war & another who overdid for his America & we do want it really protected from danger from now on. Enough are dead and maimed without losing out now as it easily could be. Why have the papers carried that story if reporters were made to see how much more sensible not to report it except to the FBI.

There is too much of danger ahead anyway. (*UFO File*, 1: 67)

The letter was clearly prompted by patriotism, the feeling of insecurity, and fear of another military involvement. Yet, the author also assumes that the Director of the FBI has the power to regulate the press and suspend the rights granted by the first Amendment, power equal to that given to the President in a time of war. A few years later, another President, a friend of Hoover's, Richard Nixon, cited "executive privilege" and "national security" as reasons for withholding documents in court proceedings. It was precisely this atmosphere of secrecy and suspicion that dominated the years of the Cold War and the activities of the FBI.

⁴ The names of the authors of the letters are deleted in the FBI file.

However, the letter also points to another important phenomenon. The first sightings of the “flying saucers” were not thought to be of alien origin, but rather were associated with a new weapon used by the treacherous Russians to spy on Americans. Such incidents were not without precedent. During World War I, the United States developed the first unmanned “balloon bombers,” which were small, cheap, wind-driven balloons carrying incendiary bombs. They were to be launched in enormous numbers from bases in France to destroy forests and croplands in Germany. The armistice prevented their deployment, but in World War II they were used by the British to bomb German-occupied Europe and by the Japanese to set forest fires in the western United States. More than 9,000 transpacific balloons were launched from bases in Japan to drop incendiaries on North America. It was people’s reports that awakened intelligence analysts to the fact that the United States was being attacked with a hitherto unsuspected enemy weapon (Saler, Ziegler, and Moore 56).

The following letter received by the FBI might be an example of a balloon bomber sighting:

Recently I have heard and read about reports of disc-shaped aircraft or whatever they are, in our western regions. They reminded me of a nearly forgotten incident in Germany, after the war. I report this to you because I feel this may be of international scope.

My buddy and I went on pass to see a friend of his. One evening the three of us were driving along some back roads when I sighted a strange looking object in the sky from eight to ten miles to our front and approximately 5,000 feet high.

I immediately stopped the jeep for a better look. The object rapidly came toward us, descending slowly. About a mile away it stopped its horizontal motion but continued a slow oscillating descent, similar to a descending parachute. Then suddenly it dropped in a spiral motion.

Immediately I drove over to where it had dropped. It took almost five minutes to reach the place but we saw nothing. After ten minutes of cruising around the area it became too dark to see so we went back to town. (*UFO File*, 1: 32)

Despite the fact that the “flying saucers” were not originally thought to be of celestial nature, and it was only later that the myth of the alien landing in Roswell was created, in 1947 a few people began to voice what later became part of the Roswell tradition. On July 8, 1947, the FBI office in San Diego, California, received a memorandum sent by a concerned citizen, a holder of “several university degrees and former university department head” to “certain scientists of distinction, important aeronautical and military au-

thorities, to a number of public officials and to a few publications.” After expressing his disbelief that this letter could accomplish anything of consequence, since the information included in it has been acquired by “supernatural means,” the writer proceeds to warn that an attack on the “flying saucers” might have disastrous consequences for the attacker. The destruction of the attacking side might create “near panic and international suspicion.” Risking to be ridiculed, as the author says, he decides to mention the principal facts concerning those craft. According to him, some of the disks carry crews and some are under remote control. The alien mission is peaceful and they are contemplating settling on Earth. He also describes the aliens as “human-like but much larger in size.” They do not come from any particular planet, but “from an etheric planet which interpenetrates with our own and is not perceptible to us.” Their bodies and aircraft materialize at will and they possess “a type of radiant energy, or ray, which will easily disintegrate any attacking ship.” The only way to communicate with them is by radar or other complicated signal system. He ends his letter by asking that the aliens be “treated with every kindness” stressing “the responsibility that rests upon the few in authority who are able to understand this matter” (*UFO File*, 1: 22).

One of the latest versions of the myth accounts for the incident in Roswell in the following way: During the first week of July 1947, a descending Mogul balloon, the weather balloon, and the attached instrument array struck the ground near Roswell on the Foster ranch operated by William Brazel. Meanwhile, an alien spaceship crashed either because it malfunctioned or because it had a catastrophic encounter with the Mogul Balloon. The main portion of the spacecraft, along with its crew, struck the ground at a site removed from the site of the debris on the Foster ranch (Saler, Ziegler, and Moore 27).

Sometime before July 5, Brazel found the scattered wreckage, and on July 7 he went into Roswell and reported his discovery to Sheriff George Wilcox. Wilcox notified authorities at the Roswell Army Air Field, and the base intelligence officer, Major Jesse Marcel, accompanied by another officer, visited the ranch with Brazel to collect the wreckage. The debris they found on the ranch was imprinted with purple-like symbols. Part of the debris consisted of metallic sheets which exhibited greater hardness than any terrestrial metal. Marcel returned to the base with the wreckage and reported to his superiors that it could not be identified. Marcel’s superior, Colonel William Blanchard, reported the discovery of the unidentified wreckage to the officers at Strategic Air Command (SAC). Shortly afterwards, he found out that the main body of the spaceship and the bodies of three of its crew had been discovered (Saler, Ziegler, and Moore 28).

The military secured the area by placing a cordon of troops around the debris field on the Foster ranch, and the site was cleared of wreckage. The small humanoid alien bodies and some of the wreckage were temporarily taken to the Roswell Army Air Field hospi-

tal, where a civilian witness was ejected by military police and told not to reveal what he had seen. He was threatened with reprisals by a black sergeant and a redheaded captain if he failed to comply. All three bodies “showed signs of exposure to the elements and the ravages of scavengers.” The wreckage and the bodies were flown to other locations for analysis.

Colonel Blanchard ordered the base publicity officer to issue a statement about the wreckage found by Brazel. The press release, which appeared on July 8, announced the recovery of the remains of a flying disc that had been sent on to higher headquarters. Subsequently to the release, Blanchard notified authorities at SAC that a crashed alien spaceship and alien bodies had been discovered. However, the authorities at SAC, General Roger Ramsey repudiated the official press release by announcing in a radio broadcast that the wreckage of the alleged flying disk was merely the remains of a downed weather balloon. The dual cover stories represent “excesses committed in the name of national security,” and the government’s sustained efforts to keep hidden the true events at Roswell deny us “proof at last that we are not alone in the universe” (Saler, Ziegler, and Moore 28).

The two accounts of the Roswell incident seem to share a few features. First, there is the basic assumption that Earth has been visited by extraterrestrial beings superior to humans. Their superiority manifests itself either in their ability to materialize themselves at will and their possession of a weapon capable of destroying any attacker, or, in the Roswell version, in the fact that their ships are constructed of a special unearthly alloy. The aliens’ intentions are peaceful, although if attacked they can return the fire. Knowledge about the extraterrestrials is restricted. People acquire it by “supernatural means” or, in the case of the Roswell myth, the government guards the secret fearing that if the truth is revealed, global panic will ensue.

In fact, the alien landing is unverifiable since either it is a matter of belief and supernatural abilities or it is protected by a government conspiracy. In the Roswell incident, the government is presented as a secretive organization and oppressor involved in covering the true story. As in every story, there is a grain of truth in this one, too. The military authorities were unwilling to disclose the true nature of the weather balloon’s operation and it was years later that the two events were related to each other and the debris on the Foster ranch was identified as that of the Mogul balloons. On the other hand, Congress investigation of all government agencies involved in the Roswell incident, which was initiated by a Senator from New Mexico at the beginning of the 1990s, only confirmed what the believers of the Roswell myth have always suspected. The investigation revealed that the Roswell incident was not an instance of an alien landing on Earth and that the government was not in possession of any alien bodies or artifacts. However, as the

advocates of UFO stress, since the investigation was carried out by the government, its results cannot be trusted. The government is not in the position to provide conclusive evidence because it has been involved in the conspiracy itself.

The creation of the myth of an alien landing in Roswell is another example of people's hostility toward government authority. It is a manifestation of the fear and rebellion inspired by the secrecy and suspicion of the Cold War years, the activities of the FBI and its Director Hoover, as well as the decline of government authority during the years of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the Irangate in the 1980s. In addition to the financial motives, which undoubtedly drive those who spread the myth of Roswell, there is probably the ever-present pleasure of telling a story and entertaining listeners. Besides, the form of the myth, that is, a pseudo-scientific report designed to disclose a true story, has misled many historians about the purpose of the Roswell literature. All those popular sentiments are bound to keep the myth alive for future generations, which will certainly enrich the story with elements of popular culture and technological revolution.

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