

Bait and Switch on 'Roswell: The Smoking Gun'

DAVID E. THOMAS

In November 2002, the Sci Fi Channel heavily promoted a new documentary about the Roswell UFO Incident. The promotion for the November 22 program, titled "The Roswell Crash: Startling New Evidence," made this surprising declaration about the program: "Working under top-secret conditions, archaeologists from the University of New Mexico, in partnership with Sci Fi Channel, set out to uncover conclusive physical evidence to help prove whether the claim of an extraterrestrial craft crash is science fiction or science fact. Hosted by Bryant Gumbel . . ." (Sci Fi 2002).

Before the airing, the leader of the UNM archaeology team, Bill Doleman, would only hint that he had found "something" (Fleck 2002a). His words were limited, because the Sci Fi Channel would not allow any comments prior to the November 22 airing. In an online chat for the Sci Fi Channel a few days before the program, Doleman just said "Watch the show, your eyes will be opened wide" (Doleman 2002b). The promotions for the show promised to deliver startling new "smoking gun evidence." It wasn't stated explicitly by Sci

Fi, but most observers got the obvious impression that the new "smoking gun" must have *something* to do with the official, scientific archaeological dig the Sci Fi Channel was so excited about. As it turned out, nothing could have been further from the truth. The archaeology dig was the "bait." A dubious analysis of over-enlarged images of a fuzzy half-century-old photograph would be the "switch."

I started worrying that the show would be a hopeless disaster when I got a look at the Test Plan for the dig (Doleman 2002a). The biggest red flag was the statement that "Messrs. Don Schmitt and Tom Carey—recognized Roswell Incident researchers—will serve as technical advisors on the project." Schmitt has severe credibility problems, especially within the UFO community. There were other omens in the Sci Fi Channel chat (Doleman 2002b): Doleman said, "I would note that all the volunteers were very UFO savvy." That is, the volunteers wielding trowels and bagging specimens for the ten-day dig were UFO believers brought in by the Sci Fi Channel. Doleman did provide some very reasonable comments during his Sci Fi chat. He said, "I know of no professional archaeologist who claims to have any evidence of alien visitation of Earth," and "I think we all recognize the importance of putting the pudding to the test, and tasting it." But Doleman also hinted that he believes there is something to the Roswell Incident:

"While the story has a life of its own, there is probably a grain of truth, whatever it might be, at the heart of what anthropologists call an oral tradition."

I mentioned my concerns on the news log of the *New Mexicans for Science and Reason* (NMSR, www.nmsr.org), writing ". . . Schmitt is a very poorly-regarded UFO researcher. He is the author of two Roswell books with Kevin Randle, but Randle broke off his partnership with Schmitt when he found that Schmitt had lied to him about his college degrees, about working as a medical illustrator, and about being in the witness protection program. Schmitt told Randle he was not a postman (on tape!), but it turned out he *was* a postman after all" (see Randle 1997 for the details). I concluded the pre-show Web log with this tentative assessment: "Has definitive proof of life on other planets been found at last? Or is this just another over-hyped event like Geraldo's opening of Al Capone's vault? Will UNM be at the center of the most ground-breaking story of the millennium, or will UNM's integrity as a scientific research institution be co-opted by sleazy network executives out for a fast buck? Will there be a name change to the UNM College of Arts and Science Fictions? Maybe we'll find out November 22."

When November 22 finally rolled around, my fears were realized in spades. As far as the archaeological dig

David E. Thomas, an Albuquerque-area physicist and mathematician, has followed the Roswell case closely for years. He is President of New Mexicans for Science and Reason, a CSICOP Fellow, and a SKEPTICAL INQUIRER consulting editor.

went, the "something" turned out to be a v-shaped feature found in a backhoe trench made at the spot where advisors Schmitt and Carey thought the Roswell craft had skidded long ago. *The Albuquerque Journals* John Fleck summed it up this way in his November 23 story, "Aliens Must Have Packed Up, Left": "It might be a furrow in the earth from the crash of an alien spacecraft. Or it might be a coyote burrow. The strange furrow and some bags of dirt locked away for further study are all the Sci Fi Channel has to show for ten days of excavation at one of the most bizarre sites in American archaeology. . . ." (Fleck 2002b)

Doleman has said repeatedly that he is not getting good treatment from the media. He told me in an e-mail that reporting is "reductive," and that the reporter will only write about what he or she wants heard. Doleman said that reporter Fleck had not mentioned many of the things he had emphasized to him personally, such as the backhoe operator's assertion that the v-shaped trench was not an artifact of the backhoe, and that the operator had "felt" the anomaly through the controls. Doleman expressed more reservations about the media in an Archaeology Channel audio interview for the Web (Doleman 2002c), and said this about *NMSR's* article when asked about any negative reactions: "New Mexicans for Science and Reason had some things on their Web site that was [*sic*] fairly negative. Most of it I can trace to people mistakenly thinking that what I found proved the existence of UFOs. I never said that at all." (Actually, *NMSR's* comments mainly expressed concern over the project advisors Schmidt and Carey, and said *nothing* about the still-embargoed findings of the UNM archaeologists.)

And that was about all there was to the archaeology part of the November 22 Sci Fi program. The team did turn up an "alternative furrow," but everyone lost interest in that when it turned up in a 1946 photograph, taken a year before the alleged Incident. There are also the

many bags of specimens that the Sci Fi Channel made a big show of having guarded under lock and key. But these bags don't contain any obviously intriguing specimens such as, say, a piece of a spaceship. In fact, some material bagged by one of the eager volunteers as possible "fiber optics" was simply some nylon strands from the team's grid lines (Doleman 2002c). An official analysis remains to be conducted, but when I met with Doleman he suggested that there would be no "show stoppers."

So, what *was* the Sci Fi Channel's shocking new evidence? As John Fleck described it in his November 23 story, "The most dramatic 'smoking gun' in Friday's show came in the form of a piece of paper in an Army officer's hand in a 1947 photo. A UFO researcher, David Rudiak, claims a computer enhancement of the photo allowed him to read about 'victims' and a crashed disk in the old memo. Critics say Rudiak's analysis is little more than fuzzy blobs in the blown-up images interpreted to suit his preconceived notions about Roswell. 'It's totally subjective,' said Dave Thomas, a Peralta physicist and longtime Roswell crash skeptic. 'The 'smoking gun' is just suggestive wishful thinking' . . ." (Fleck 2002b).

Rudiak's claims about the Ramey photo, and his belief that the words "victim of the crash" can be read with enough confidence to say that this proves a spaceship really did crash near Roswell, have been bantered around the Internet for over two years. Rudiak is absolutely convinced that his analysis is genuine, and spends much time rebutting his critics. One of his strongest critics is UFO author Kevin Randle, who has extensively tested Rudiak's claims with Jim Houran (Randle 2002). Randle's conclusion: "The real point here, however, is that the word 'Victims' is not clearly legible to those who have not been told that it appears in the memo, or told where to look."



Bill Doleman

Three days after the Sci Fi "Smoking Gun" show, I e-mailed Rudiak for the first time, asking, "Has your method ever been applied to other messages with similar levels of distortion and fuzziness? Have you been able to decode such messages with proper blind protocols? In other words, has your technique ever been validated?" I went on to ask Rudiak to consider participating in such a test, and I offered this method of avoiding any funny business: ". . . I would send images (both fuzzy and clear) to an impartial, respected third party before any 'decoding' is performed; then, after you've decoded the message, that third party could easily assess the accuracy of the translation, and inform all participants of the results. Are you interested? If so, do you have suggestions for a respected, impartial third party to ensure a proper comparison? Best regards from New Mexico, Dave Thomas."

I never received an answer to this letter. I wondered if Rudiak was reacting to it, however, when his Web site added a new poll asking visitors to judge for themselves. Rudiak's poll consists of leading questions, which simply "prime" people with what they are expected to see. The first questions in Rudiak's "Citizen's Poll" are "Are the words, 'The Victims' present in the Ramey memo?" and "Is the phrase, 'In the Disc' present

in the Ramey memo?" (Rudiak 2002a). But the confirmation that David Rudiak had indeed received my suggestion for a validation test came quite unexpectedly, when I stumbled upon a Web site operated by UFO buff Grant Cameron (Cameron 2002). He wrote ". . . James

be needed if there was actually any meat to Rudiak's claims. But to really appreciate the depth and breadth of David Rudiak's UFO research, one must learn about his attack on the character of Charles Moore, the physicist who launched the experimental balloon train

were "not the last word," and were mainly interesting because they showed that prevailing conditions that day did not rule out the *possibility* that Flight #4 crashed into the Foster Ranch, causing the Roswell Incident.

So I conducted my own physics calculation. I cracked open Moore's book, and typed in his givens (balloon altitude, wind speed, and wind direction over time) into a spreadsheet. I then calculated winds in north and east directions, and these agreed exactly with Moore's figures. To calculate the variable of interest here—the ground track of Moore's 1947 balloon launch—I read the legend of Moore's table (also posted on Rudiak's Web site), which specified that eastward and northward displacements were obtained by summing the products of the appropriate wind speed components with the corresponding time intervals. Mathematically, this is as simple as saying that distance equals velocity times time. When I entered in these formulas, my results agreed almost perfectly (less than a quarter-mile discrepancy over the whole trajectory) with Moore's. The small differences could easily have been due to roundoff—Moore was working with internally precise numbers, while I only had the rounded-off values I typed in from the table. The main thing was that I found absolutely *no* evidence of "cooking the books"—indeed, Moore described his work in such a fashion that another physicist, following his directions, could get near-identical results. Roswell skeptic Tim Printy has published a thoughtful analysis of many of Rudiak's claims, arriving at the same conclusion I did (Printy 2002).

I also found that I could get close to Rudiak's "very different" proposed trajectory by joggling the calculation by one time step. In the altered calculation, the balloon goes eastward for one extra time step (about thirty minutes), and thus

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Oberg has reappeared and issued a challenge to David Rudiak related to his revolutionary research on the 1947 Ramey UFO Memo. The research was referred to by the Sci Fi channel in their recent 2-hour Roswell documentary special as 'smoking gun' evidence. Dave Thomas, a UFO skeptic from New Mexico, has made the same offer to Rudiak. 'There is obviously a lot of collaboration going on amongst these people to discredit me,' Rudiak said. 'That's probably a good sign. It means my work has hit a big fat nerve.' . . . If Rudiak accepts the challenge he immediately grants either Thomas or Oberg an instant position as the official debunker on any national media coverage of Rudiak work. This instant national 'Sci Fi Channel debunker' status will be gained without having done five minutes research. It is a wonderful ploy for fame and fortune. The test, as Rudiak knows will be a 'no-win' test set up to muddy the waters. . . . A second major problem David is aware of is that it is impossible to convince a skeptic of anything. That is because 'skepticism' is based on an attitude, and has nothing to do with rational thought. . . ."

Rudiak claims earth-shaking proof of an earth-shaking event, and yet refuses to correspond with critics directly, preferring to demonize them behind their backs. Such cheesy tactics would hardly

now widely regarded as the actual source of the Roswell Incident (Thomas 1995). In a Web article titled "The Phony Mogul Balloon Trajectory: How a debunker scientist 'cooked the books' to support his pet theory" (Rudiak 2002b), Rudiak dissects Moore's physics analysis of just which way a balloon launched from Alamogordo on June 4, 1947, would have traveled, given the best available historical knowledge of weather conditions and balloon performance. Moore discussed the trajectory calculations in detail in a book he co-authored with Benson Saler and Charles A. Ziegler (Saler 1997). Moore offered his analysis as "A possible ground track for NYU Flight #4," and described it as a "qualitative test," not a quantitative one. Yet Rudiak has found reams of points to quibble with. Preferring volumes of quantity over quality, Rudiak's analysis runs page after mind-numbing page. The most serious charge he levels at Moore is that "his math is wrong . . . Moore . . . ended up corrupting his own data . . ." and "Moore's calculation of a trajectory from the table he sets up based on these assumptions is also mathematically bogus."

I spoke with Professor Moore about all this on November 27, but he didn't want to get into the math behind Rudiak's shrill accusations. He simply reiterated that his trajectory calculations

Forgers frequently select genuine old artifacts upon which to inflict their handiwork. Examples that I have personally investigated and helped expose include such inscribed works as two Daniel Boone muskets, the diary of Jack the Ripper, a *carte de visite* photo of Robert E. Lee, a dictionary with flyleaf notes by Charles Dickens, and many more (Nickell 1990; 1996).

Mounting evidence has begun to suggest that the James ossuary may be yet another such production.

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ends up about seventeen miles farther northeast than in Moore's original calculation. The small difference is within the error of Moore's data. His point, after all, was to show that the winds that day did not preclude the balloon's arrival at the Roswell ranch. Had Moore's analysis showed the balloon traveling south, say, to El Paso, now *that* would have eliminated Flight #4 as a candidate for the Roswell debris source.

Rudiak's charges of Moore's "cooking the books" are much stronger evidence of Rudiak's incompetence than they are of Moore's alleged scientific malfeasance.

In the end, the Sci Fi Channel's ballyhooed "Smoking Gun" turned out to be just the same old stuff: more fuzzy

photographs and shrill charges of conspiracy. It promised solid new scientific evidence, but the Sci Fi Channel exploited the UNM archaeologists' careful work, to the University's embarrassment. In the ongoing effort to solidify and entrench the Roswell Myth, some cracks are beginning to show.

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