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The alien next door

New books titillate, but serve to frighten rather than inform

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

Long after the echoes of fireworks fade, reverberations from another July 4 event will continue unabated. This Independence Day also marked the 50th anniversary of history's most famous UFO event; tens of thousands made pilgrimages to beleaguered Roswell, N.M., the site of the notorious 1947 weather balloon — sorry, flying saucer — crash.

Want to know more about Roswell's UFO than Time put in its recent cover story? Fox sells a video of the black-and-white "alien autopsy" film that was "discovered" a couple of years back, featuring a "doctor" slicing open a spindly-armed, expressionless humanoid and pulling out the dummy's unattached "internal organs." (Alternatively, you can rent *Striptease* and watch, in color, Roswell native Demi Moore, another spindly-armed, expressionless humanoid, albeit one with better-proportioned latex organs.)

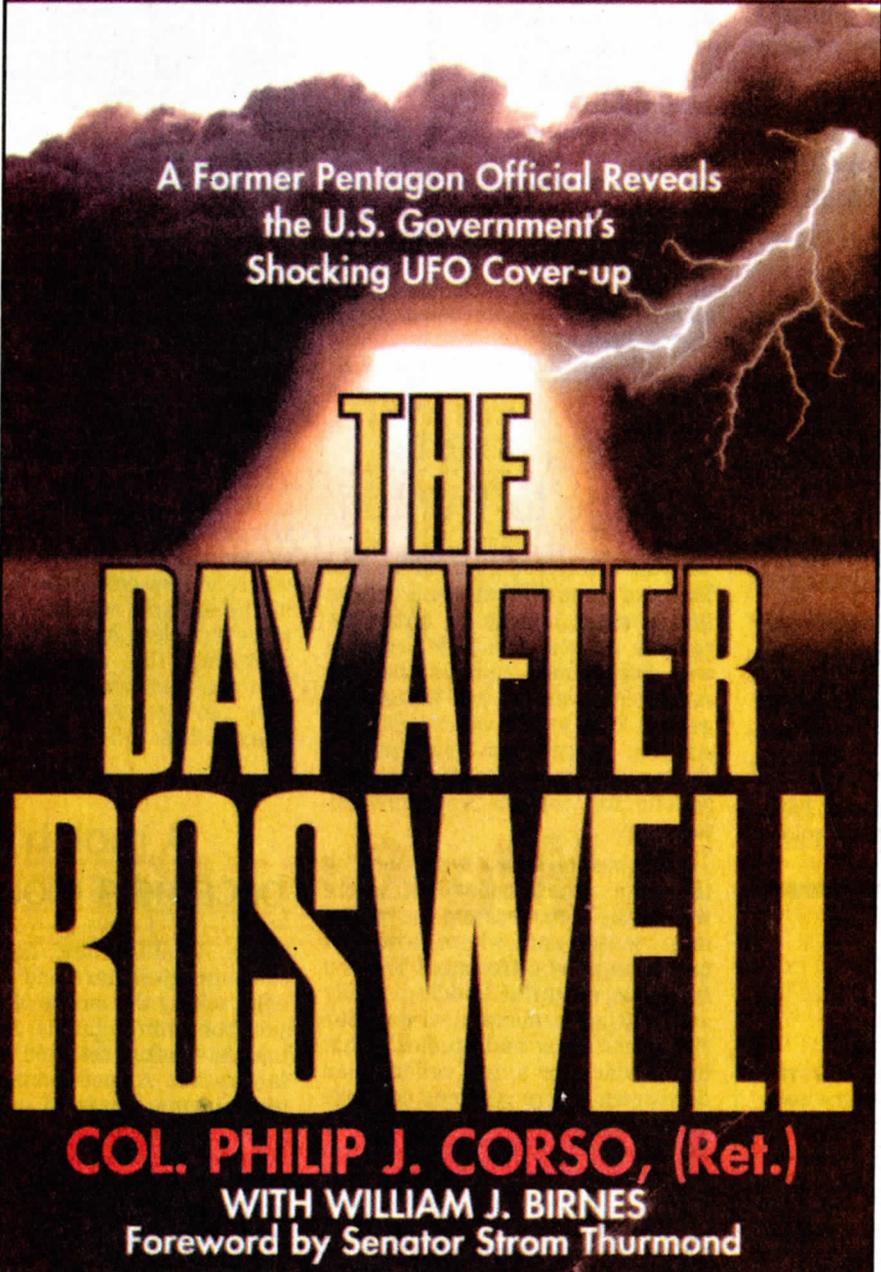
If you have more than an hour to waste on the topic, you can check out one of the nine Roswell books published so far this decade. The newest, Philip J. Corso's *The Day After Roswell* (Pocket, \$23), claims that the government secretly used alien technology from the crash to develop fiber optics and computer chips, which surely is news to the real-life engineers on planet Earth who spent years working to invent fiber optics and computer chips. The book has received attention because of its generous foreword by 94-year-old Sen. Strom Thurmond, whose stricken aides are now insisting that he didn't mean to endorse Corso's yarn.

And, finally, if you want to see just

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THE TRUTH EXPOSED AFTER FIFTY YEARS!

A Former Pentagon Official Reveals
the U.S. Government's
Shocking UFO Cover-up



THE DAY AFTER ROSWELL

COL. PHILIP J. CORSO, (Ret.)
WITH WILLIAM J. BIRNES
Foreword by Senator Strom Thurmond

"The Day After Roswell" deals with the New Mexico sighting of an alleged UFO. Also newly published, "Alien Agenda" is an overview of UFO information.

how many nuts drop when you give the tree a good shake, try going on the World Wide Web and typing "Roswell." Roswell may be the center of UFO interest this summer, but aliens are everywhere. Not that anyone should be surprised by this: From astrology, past-life regression and biorhythms to homeopathy, dianetics and shark-cartilage anti-cancer pills, Americans have long been suckers for theories and explana-

tions that defy science and, often, common sense.

Martians landed near Princeton in Orson Welles' 1938 radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, and the first UFOs-are-Martians book rolled off the presses not long after; it'll be many more decades before the last one does.

• see ALIENS, CC3

Aliens

• continued from CC1

Most are cheap collections of doctored photos and hysterical text purporting to prove that aliens are in our skies, but there are plenty of volumes bearing the imprimatur of major publishers and substantial advertising campaigns.

The summer's biggest UFO release, Jim Marrs' *Alien Agenda* (HarperCollins, \$25), is subtitled *Investigating the Extraterrestrial Presence Among Us*. Aimed at the lay reader, it's a comprehensive overview of "UFOlogy," full of recent "research" that should bring you up to date on a wide range of alien-invasion nuttiness. The publisher calls it "no less than the last word on the subject."

Marrs may be certifiable, but his book can't be laughed off. And make no mistake: *Alien Agenda* is a bad book, an ugly book, a book that deserves to be instantly remaindered to the \$1.99 table, next to *You and Your Colon* and *Kathie Lee: The Unauthorized Biography*.

Why bother addressing Marrs' rolling tide of fanciful nonsense at all? Two reasons: First, a great deal of money is at stake. Tens of thousands of people are expected to drop \$25 each on this book. It's receiving a sizable first printing from a major publisher that is working hard to put shiny silver hardcover copies in the display windows of every Barnes & Noble and Waldenbooks. Second, and almost as scary: The gathering trend toward paranoid credulity, toward believing the universe is controlled by unseen forces, is — no joke — a serious, long-term threat to the country's mental and physical well-being. Consider Timothy McVeigh. Or Heaven's Gate. Or Pat Buchanan.

It's a very small step from seeing unusual lights in the sky and thinking they're probably Martians to believing they're probably black helicopters sent by the United Nations to take away America's handguns.

ALL THAT SAID, there are reasons to pick up *Alien Agenda*. It's a useful compendium of many of the breathless, unsubstantiated theories currently being bandied about by UFOlogists. And as fiction, it's compelling reading, though your eyes may glaze over at the pages of government-secrecy minutiae. Make sure to skip the dozen pages on Nazi conspiracies — something about *Reichsleiter* Martin Bormann and a blueprint to build German flying saucers. Don't worry about it.

Anyway, the convoluted tale of Hitler's UFO plans isn't even close to being the book's widest leap of logic. Marrs' first chapter is devoted to a breathtakingly outlandish claim — that the moon is probably a) hollow and b) an alien spacecraft. His primary source is a 1979 for-adults book

charmingly titled *Secrets of Our Spaceship Moon*.

Marrs goes on, usually without citation or reference, to explore historical "evidence" for an alien presence on Earth, using everything from ancient poems to cave art. Mundane explanations are brushed aside. At one point he cites a biblical passage and notes, "some believe Jacob may have seen ancient astronauts exiting a UFO." Whoever those "some" are, they must be lots of fun at parties. And how's this: "Some researchers claim that moon photos show a series of transparent domes under which can be seen orderly lines indicating the possible ruins of cities or large stations." (Which researchers? What photos? What domes? And are these the same "some" who think Jacob saw a UFO?) My favorite sentence is so deliciously absurd that it demands to be read aloud: "Many studies indicate that razor blades stay sharp longer and fruit ripens slower when placed within a properly oriented pyramid." Marrs does not elaborate, nor does he cite any of the "many studies," nor does he make reference to his presumed collection of sharp razor blades and slowly ripening fruit.

Here's where *Alien Agenda* gets creepy: "(Some researchers even claimed that Kennedy's assassination was to prevent him from revealing the news of extraterrestrial visitation to the public." Keep in mind that Marrs' only other book is 1989's *Crossfire*, which implied that John F. Kennedy was assassinated because he was planning to pull the troops out of Vietnam. Apparently, then, we are to conclude that Kennedy was killed because he was about to end the war, tell America about UFOs, and reveal some great new diet tips.

CONSIDERING MARRS' obvious enthusiasm for UFOlogy — and his tendency to seek out the lone nut who disagrees with everyone else and insist that he's the only one telling the truth — it's distressing to find *Alien Agenda's* publisher dubbing Marrs "a skeptical, impartial journalist." In fact, Marrs' insistence that he fairly examines "both sides" of the UFO issue is not only blatantly false but insidious and misleading. The virtual absence of debate in the pages of *Alien Agenda* — outside of discourse between, say, those who believe aliens are subjecting America's best and brightest to anal probes and those who believe the aliens are merely implanting thoughts of anal probes — leaves the unarmed reader with the impression that these claims are beyond reasonable doubt. They're not.

For instance, Kal Korff's new *The Roswell UFO Crash: What They Don't Want You to Know* (Prometheus, \$26.95), is a small voice of sanity breaking through the clouds over New Mexico, a thorough (if somewhat dry) examination of the Roswell crash. His well-researched

conclusion backs up the Air Force's recent report: The UFO was, of course, a weather balloon. Unconvinced? Pick up the book.

Of course, even if Korff's book had come out in time for Marrs to study it, there's little chance he would have. Despite his pretense of impartiality, he cites none of the numerous books, and only a handful of articles, that challenge UFOlogists' claims — even the pieces that debunk the specific events to which he devotes page after page.

Marrs, it seems, will believe anything — the wackier, the better. In various digressions, he discusses the prophecies of Nostradamus, the efficacy of ESP, and the explorations of *Chariots of the Gods* author Erich von Däniken — without even hinting that their validity is, to be charitable, dubious. His endorsement of von Däniken's racist Martians-built-the-pyramids idiocies is particularly bizarre. Marrs buttresses the Martians/pyramids hypothesis with "evidence" that the Old Testament doesn't mention the Jews working on the pyramids — though the Great Pyramid was built around 2900 B.C. and the Exodus occurred some 1,600 years later.

Whatever. Marrs displays zero understanding of either the laws of science or what constitutes evidence. About the alien autopsy film he writes, "no one was ever able to prove beyond question that it was a fake." On UFOlogists' failure to produce actual alien implants: "such evidence cannot be regarded as absolute proof that such implants don't exist."

Of course, it's not up to skeptics to "prove beyond question" that things *didn't* happen; no one can prove something *didn't* happen. It's up to believers to prove they *did* happen. For example, if I were to insist that aliens created the world today, and implanted "memory chips" to make us believe in a nonexistent past, science couldn't "prove beyond question" that my claim was false. That's not how science works. Science cannot answer every question about *anything*, whether it be evolution, the moon, the pyramids, or a streak of light in the sky. There will always be gaps. Some fill these gaps with God; Marrs fills them with Martians.

Marrs affects a snide tone toward those who would leave the gaps unfilled. He slams "intransigent debunkers," who practice "UFO censorship" and have a "prejudice... against anything psychic." "Their bias was obvious from the start," he writes about one unfavorable judgment, as though he demands the same impartiality of himself.

THREE HUNDRED PAGES IN, the reader still has learned nothing of Marrs' title — what, after all, is the "alien agenda"? Despite a title that conjures up an image of blue-suited Martians sitting around a conference table staring at a pie chart, *Alien Agenda* never quite reveals what the aliens want or what their

plans are. It's not for lack of trying: To deduce the agenda, Marrs relies on a practice known as remote viewing, a method of discovery by which someone sitting in a room can allegedly "see" things and events in faraway locations — another state, another country, another planet. (I tried it: I closed my eyes tightly, concentrated, and saw Marrs cashing his royalty checks.)

Is remote viewing, which would violate every applicable law of science, effective? Absolutely, says Marrs, insisting that "remote viewing works," and backing this up by misinterpreting results of failed experiments; that's it, and that's all. He follows with pages of imaginative conjecture and sci-fi futurism about alien spacecraft and galactic federations, all with attributions like, "According to the RV report..." A sample: "These Martians are angry at us right now, according to one report. They've been waiting centuries for human civilization to advance..." Guess we'd better get cracking — or they might step up their highly advanced anal-probe program. I have trouble imagining even the most credulous reader accepting the fantastic remote-viewer stories without a grain — make that a carton — of salt.

BUT WHY BELIEVE any of this hokey? That's a question that, tellingly, Marrs is unable to answer. His substitution of boosterism for inquiry makes him unable to address the single most interesting aspect of this whole phenomenon: *why* people are convinced that aliens are among us.

Marrs leaves out altogether the issue of psychology as a factor in UFO beliefs. He doesn't discuss the startling suggestibility of even highly educated people. He doesn't address Americans' longtime search for meaning, mystery and wonder. He fails to look at UFO-saturated popular culture as a generator of feedback loops, in which each reported sighting sparks other reports and helps create an atmosphere more and more conducive to sightings.

And, worse, Marrs devotes no space to how, in recent decades, and particularly since Watergate, Americans have come to turn skepticism on its head, rejecting the legitimacy of American institutions and welcoming even the wildest views outside them. Conspiracy is integral to these beliefs: that "the medical industry" is withholding information about miracle cures; that "the scientific community" refuses to acknowledge psychokinetic phenomena; that "the government" is secreting alien bodies in Hangar 18.

Well, sometimes life itself is elusive, deep and mysterious. And while there's nothing wrong with asking questions — that's what science is based on, after all — it's counterproductive, and often silly, to rush to answer those questions with dubious assumptions that run counter to common sense.