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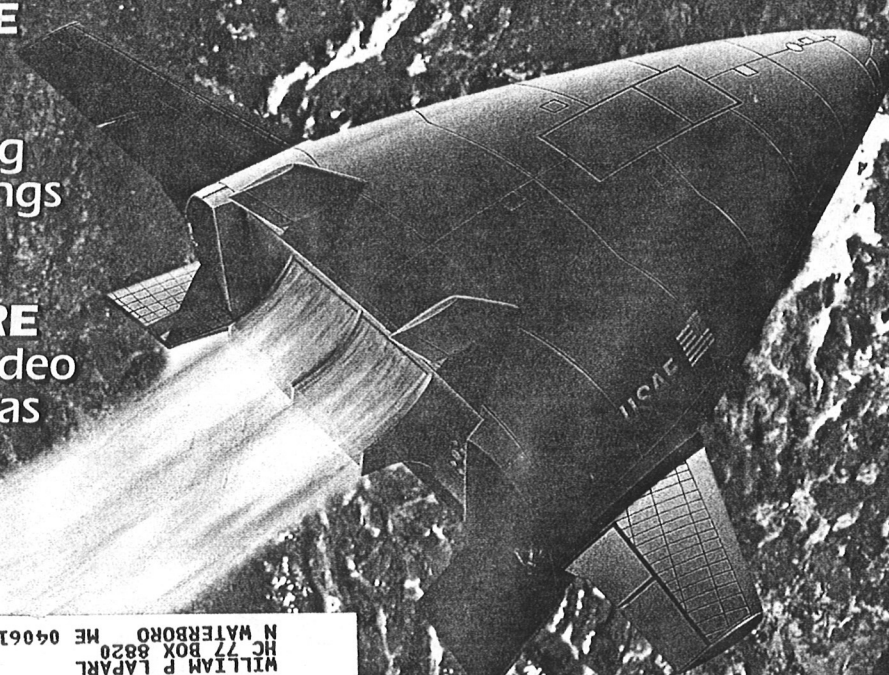


The Air Force Has  
Abandoned Top-Secret Testing  
At Its Once Most Secret Test Site.  
We Know Why And We Know  
Where They Moved It To

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# COVER STORY

Project 57: Plutonium Disposal  
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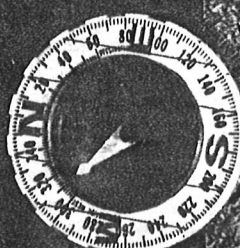
Area 51 Suffered Effects  
Of Nearby Nuclear Testing

# THE NEW AREA 51

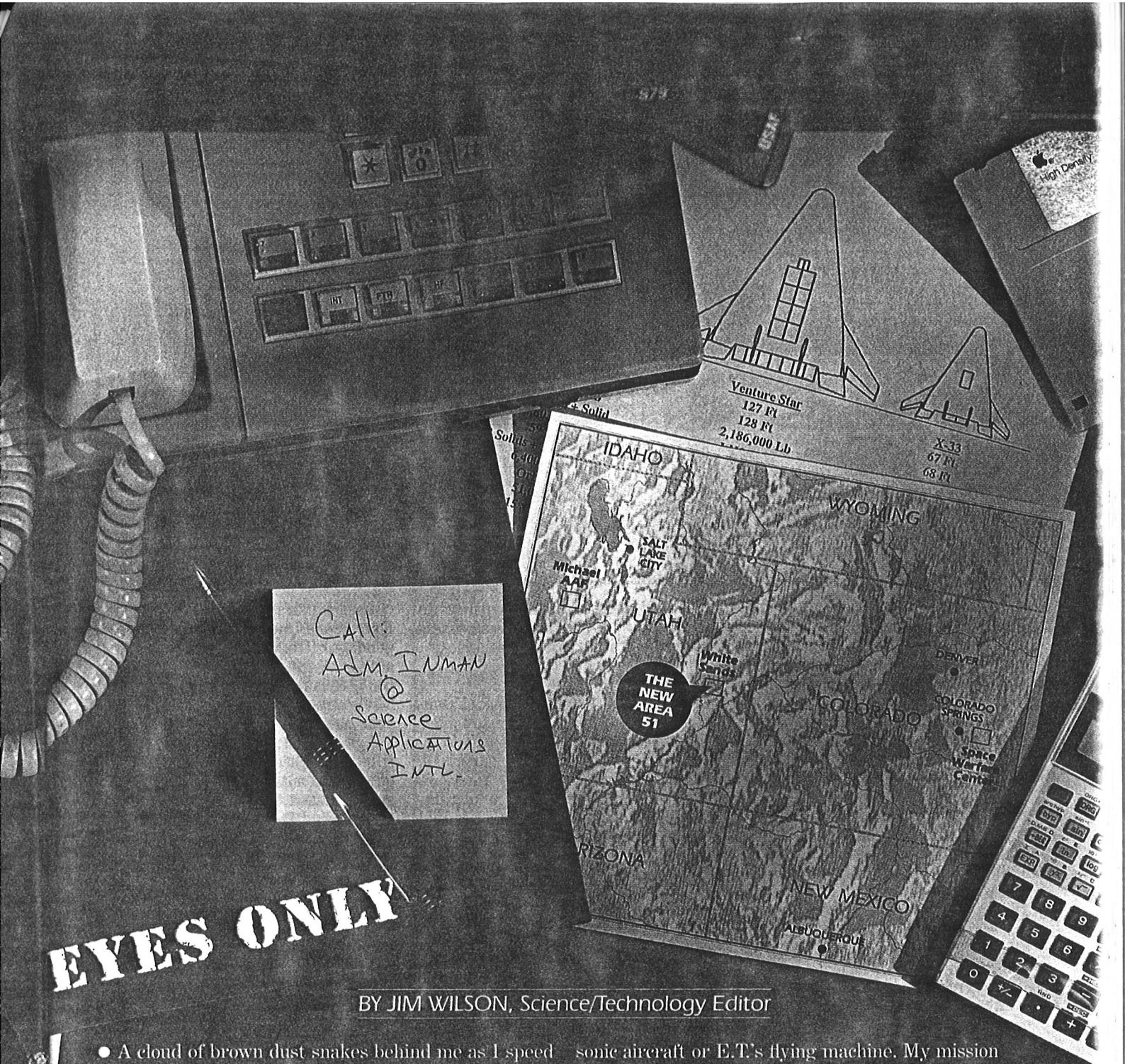
The Air Force has abandoned top-secret testing at its once most secret test site. We know why and we know where they moved it to.



AFSPC  
Space Warfare Center  
(SWC)







BY JIM WILSON, Science/Technology Editor

● A cloud of brown dust snakes behind me as I speed down the desolate desert road. A dozen miles ago, I passed the solitary steel mailbox that marks the turnoff for Area 51. For a place that isn't supposed to exist, it's odd that the "secret" air base occupies whole chapters of aviation history. It was here, in 1955, that the U-2 spyplane first took wing. In the years that followed, its successors, the A-12 and SR-71 and later the stealthy F-117A fighter and B-2 bomber, danced across the same blue-steel Nevada sky.

Rumors persist of even more amazing aircraft. Secret hangars supposedly conceal the mythical Aurora, a methane-burning replacement for the high-flying SR-71 spyplane. And—if you believe that X-files and J. Edgar Hoover's dress collection exist—there are even crashed UFOs that engineers patched up and somehow learned how to fly. I'm not searching for hyper-

sonic aircraft or E.T.'s flying machine. My mission is less lofty. I'm trying to avoid getting arrested.

When POPULAR MECHANICS correspondent Abe Dane traveled these roads to research our January 1995 cover story, "Flying Saucers Are Real," camouflaged guards driving white Jeep Cherokees dogged his every turn. Tourists who accidentally strayed down the road I am now driving on were arrested by these "cammo dudes" and heavily fined. To cover the cost of a similar encounter, I've packed an envelope with \$2000 in \$50 bills in the trunk, along with my sleeping bag and extra bottled water.

On my flight to Las Vegas, which is about 100 miles to the south, I read up on Area 51 lore. That may have been a mistake. Imagining what might be "out there" paints ordinary desert scenes in a sinister hue. Instead of dismissing a buzzard-pecked carcass as road kill, I



## THE NEW 'AREA 51'

The "cammo dudes" are no longer patrolling the perimeter of Area 51. What we found was a securely locked wind fence that appears to have been undisturbed for months. Below, Wilson checks the locks.



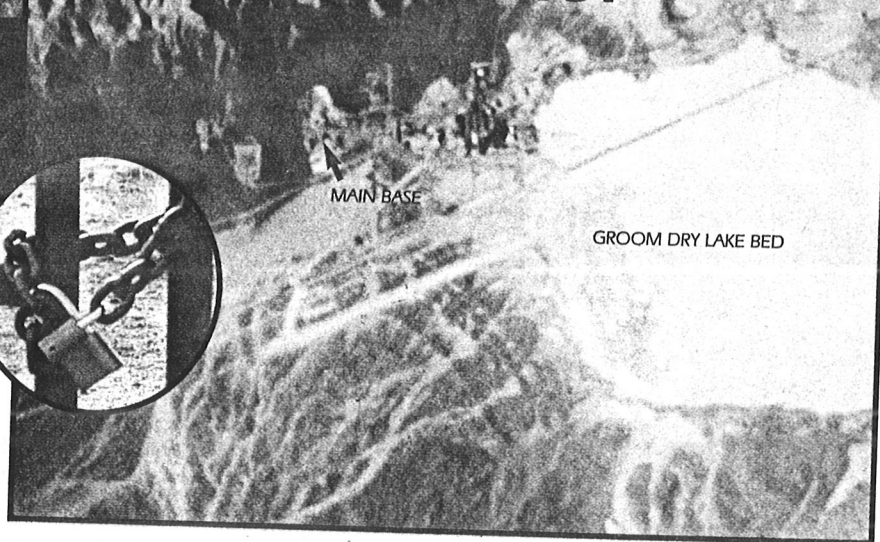
find myself wondering why aliens would travel hundreds of light-years to practice laser surgery on a cow. Driving along in this Area 51 state of mind, I'm prepared for almost anything—except for what I see next. The road has just vanished, as completely as if it never existed.

I brake the car, step out, check my map and compass, and then (sorry, Avis) climb on the trunk for a better view. A 360° scan quickly solves the mystery. There has been a washout. The missing road reappears about 100 yards ahead. Tracing its line toward the horizon, I see what I've come to find—the back door to Area 51.

There is no guard post. A cattle gate, the sort you can buy at Kmart, seals the road, but the two heavily tarnished brass locks that secure the gate's chain are no blue-light special. They are strictly military-issue. Rusting strands of waist-high barb wire hang just beyond the gateposts. I had expected something taller, electrified. The warning signs flanking the gate aren't very threatening either. One warns "no trespassing." Its weather-beaten companion cautions me that the Air Force drops real bombs on the other side of the fence. My attention returns to the locks. The tarnish extends inward toward the tumblers, suggesting they haven't seen a key in a while. Perhaps no one comes out here anymore?

To test the theory, I flash the car's headlights and lean on its horn. After 15 minutes of wearing down the battery, I quit. Disappointed, I balance my camera on the roof of the car, set the shutter-release timer and

## THE ORIGINAL AREA 51



blast off a few crooked snapshots to show the boss my trip to Las Vegas hasn't been all buffet and blackjack.

### Why it moved

My visit seems to confirm what circumstantial evidence first suggested more than a year ago. Area 51 has shut down. Not that anyone should be surprised. After all, the base became America's worst-kept secret the moment talk-show host Larry King announced its presence to his national audience during a special on UFOs. Of course, UFO and aviation buffs knew this all along. The name "Area 51" and a description of its mission as the proving ground for Lockheed's U-2 reconnaissance aircraft appeared for a fleeting moment on a blackboard used as a prop in an aircraft promotional film.

The equally fleeting moment of fame that King's television exposure created for the nearby town of Rachel has also faded. Today, the locals who lunch at the Little A'le' Inn after collecting their mail from the line of postboxes that mark the

center of this town of double-wide trailers don't see too many strangers.

The unusual aerial phenomena that once lured tourists have become so rare that the Nevada state legislature has tried to help boost business by naming the adjacent stretch of Route 375 "The Extraterrestrial Highway."

As I finish my Alien Burger with Extrusions (melted cheese) and Appendages (french fries), Chuck Clark, author of the *Area 51 & S4 Handbook*, tells me he thinks the airfield's last secret plane, the Aurora, left a year ago. Bob Lazar—whose picture hangs behind me on a paneled wall filled with autographed photos of other UFO notables and several movie stars—claims the government moved the crashed flying saucer he worked on at the S4 site to a more secret location. Even Glenn Campbell—founder of the Area 51 Research Center and guide to PM correspondent Dane during his trip—has left for Las Vegas.

Though it may seem cynical to some folks, we think the most convincing evidence that top-secret testing has stopped at Area 51 comes from the Air Force itself. After years of denying the existence of an airfield at the northern end of its Nellis Range, a base spokesman in Nevada and a Department of Defense (DOD) official in Washington, D.C., both tell PM that "training and testing activities take place at the Groom Dry Lake Bed." DOD even agreed to consider—but at press time had still not acted upon—our request to visit the site.

What's happening—or more accurately, not happening—at Area 51? Lest we mislead anyone into thinking a talk-show host forced the government to abandon a perfectly good secret test site, we should point out that even before King's production crew arrived in Rachel, the Air Force had several good reasons to leave.

High on this list is the Open Skies



PM PHOTOS BY CHUCK CLARK (TOP AND INSET RIGHT) AND JIM WILSON (BOTTOM AND INSET LEFT)



## AREA 6413

Circled areas show existing launch locations that are suitable for the takeoff of the type of aircraft that will be tested from the new Area 51. The map shows the relationship between the three critical sites, the launch complex at White Sands, the landing site at Michael AAF and the Space Warfare Center.



Treaty. The pact was first proposed by President Dwight Eisenhower during a meeting with Nikita Khrushchev in Geneva, and it was finally signed into law in 1992. It allows the 27 signatory nations—including former Soviet bloc countries—to fly their most sophisticated spyplanes over one another's most sensitive military bases.

The reason the Air Force couldn't simply burrow into the surrounding mountains to hide their most secret aircraft is an equally compelling reason for it to leave. Three years ago, a group of former workers who had become seriously ill after working at Area 51 asked the government to conduct an investigation to see if they had been exposed to toxic substances. DOD lawyers convinced a judge the information had to remain secret. But Area 51's next-door neighbor, the Department of Energy (DOE), felt differently about such secrets. It had begun to make public previously classified data documenting the effects of Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) nuclear-bomb testing at the Yucca Flats test site. This data showed that long-lived radioactive residues from nearby nuclear bomb tests regularly rained down on Area 51.

However, even if there had been no spies above and radiation below to worry about, the Air Force would have likely begun packing anyway. Like the U-2 spyplane that created the need for Area 51, the base itself had become obsolete. The next generation of ultrahigh-performance military aircraft would need a different type of proving ground. We believe

we know where the Air Force will build this new base—the new Area 51, or, as it is officially named, Area 6413.

### Picking up the trail

About the time the tourist trade slumped in Rachel, Nevada, residents in the Four Corners area of Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico started seeing strange lights in the sky. What interested PM about these sightings was their proximity to Falcon Air Force Base. The small base in southern Colorado is the headquarters for the Air Force Space Command (AFSPC) and its Space Warfare Center (SWC). More importantly, the base had just become the home for the SWC's 576th Flight Test Squadron, the unit most likely to test the prototypes for the next

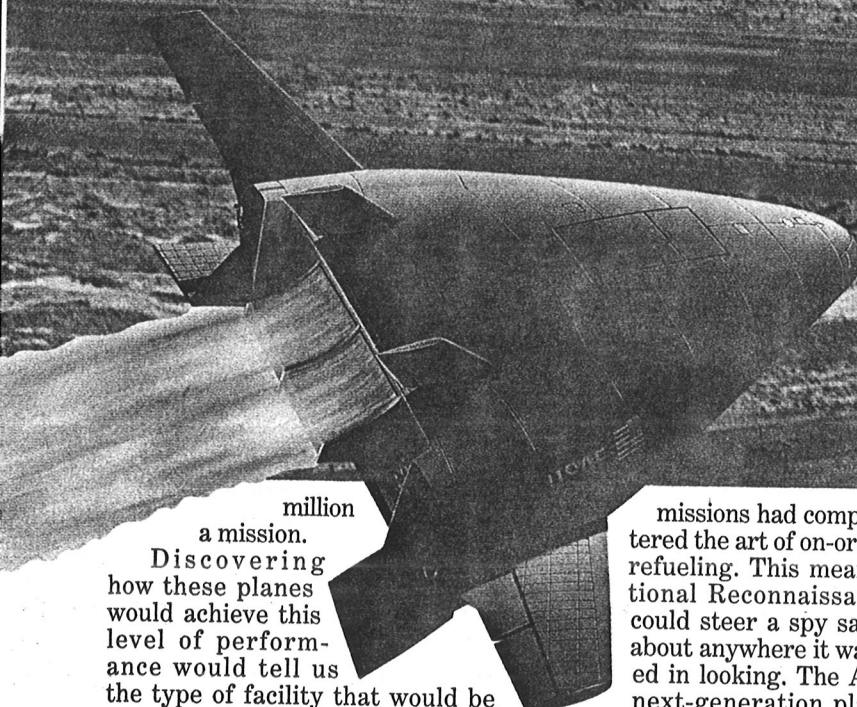
generation of breakthrough aircraft.

I booked a flight, rented a Jeep and spent two days cruising the mountains between Salinda and Colorado Springs. I didn't see strange lights or find a secret air base, but I did find the path that would eventually lead to the new Area 51.

The first break came when I learned the types of missions the Air Force expected its next-generation aircraft to fly. As the result of a series of once classified projects named Science Dawn, Science Realm and Have Region, engineers at the Air Force's Phillips Laboratory at Kirtland AFB, in New Mexico, concluded it would be possible to build a plane that could fly to a trouble spot anywhere on the globe within 40 minutes, for a bargain price of between \$1 million to \$2



## THE NEW 'AREA 51'



NASA's selection of Michael AAF as the landing site becomes the obvious choice when the profile of pop-up missions and lift advantage of altitude are considered.

million

a mission.

Discovering how these planes would achieve this level of performance would tell us the type of facility that would be needed for their initial testing. An important clue came in a remark Gen. Joseph W. Ashy, the recently retired commander of AFSPC, had made while being interviewed by *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, which has such an uncanny reputation for predicting future aircraft developments that it is often called *Aviation Leak*. Ashy said: "We will have a very short runway out there and we will have a reusable space plane." By itself, the comment might not have seemed helpful. But we already knew another important fact about the future aircraft's performance from the Have Region technical studies, which had by now been declassified. Engineers had calculated that engines capable of producing the thrust needed to reach the speeds and altitudes for fast-response global missions would be so powerful they could lift a plane off the ground vertically.

Considered together, these two pieces of information spelled bad news for our search. A plane that could land on a short runway after taking off vertically could be hidden just about anywhere. If the Air Force hadn't needed money to build this extraordinary aircraft, we might have never found the new Area 51.

The winged wonders tested at the Groom Dry Lake Bed, the original Area 51, were bought with money funneled through secret "black budget" accounts created by the nation's intelligence agencies. But since the 1970s, these organizations had better tools in the form of spy satellites. In the 1980s, the capabilities of these orbiting eyes improved even more. The Air Force officers assigned to NASA space shuttle

missions had completely mastered the art of on-orbit satellite refueling. This meant the National Reconnaissance Office could steer a spy satellite just about anywhere it was interested in looking. The Air Force's next-generation plane might gather the information a bit faster, but for the type of strategic surveillance information the intelligence community needed, its existing, well-proven assets worked just fine. And with hundreds of billions of dollars of new F-22s and Joint Strike Fighter aircraft already on its must-have list, the Air Force would likely find it impossible to get Congress to publicly finance yet another high-performance aircraft. To get its new plane, the Air Force would have to get creative.

On February 28, 1997, a pen stroke solved the Air Force's money problem. It also pointed us in the direction of the new Area 51. The event was unremarkable. Gen. Howell M. Estes 3rd, commander-in-chief of AFSPC, and NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin signed an agreement to share "redundant assets."

The most important of these redundant assets was now under construction at Lockheed Martin Skunk Works, the Palmdale, California, incubator that previously hatched the mysterious birds that disturbed the quiet of the desert near Rachel. The Air Force's breakthrough aircraft would be one the public already knew as NASA's X-33. Skunk Works engineers had designed it as a half-scale flying testbed for the space plane that would become the 21st century's space shuttle. (See Tech Update, page 24, Sept. '96.) Measuring 68 ft. long, the lifting-body-shaped craft was a direct descendant of the ultrahigh-performance Have Region aircraft. It could take off vertically, fly faster than Mach 15, soar to 50-mile altitudes and then land on an ordinary runway.

By the time it was announced, this

assets-sharing agreement between the Air Force and NASA was already old news to aerospace industry insiders. Three days earlier, Maj. Ken Verderame, a deputy manager at Phillips, had explained precisely how the X-33 could be turned into a weapon. Speaking at a NASA-sponsored technical conference in Huntsville, Alabama, he pointed out that Skunk Works designers nestled a 5 x 10-ft. payload bay between the X-33's liquid-oxygen and fuel tanks. It wouldn't be used on the NASA missions, but engineers at Phillips were already hard at work on a modular "pop-up" satellite and weapons launcher that could fit inside it. Verderame went on to explain future plans for modular "pop-in" cockpits.

Knowing that the Air Force had long planned to use the X-33 as an operational aircraft made a curious piece of information we had received months earlier fit into place. In the fall of 1996, NASA had announced the selection of the Michael Army Airfield as a backup runway for several X-33 missions. Given the field's location in a desolate stretch of desert about 80 miles southwest of Salt Lake City, the choice seemed puzzling. But now that the Air Force had acknowledged its plans to use the X-33 as a weapons platform, it made perfect sense. Studying a map of Utah shows that Michael AAF has the exact same security feature that drew U-2 developers to Area 51. It sits next to a ferocious junkyard dog.

Where the Groom Dry Lake Bed had a nuclear test site to discourage the uninvited, Michael AAF has an equally, perhaps more, compelling deterrent. It is in the midst of Dugway Proving Ground, the place where the Army stores and tests nerve gas. PM learned exactly how secure this site is when we dispatched a plane equipped with an aerial camera to get a closer look. The pilot was warned that if he tried to overfly the site he would be shot down.

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## Hitting pay dirt

With Michael AAF in Utah selected as the landing site for military X-33 missions, we believed we were fast closing in on the location of the new Area 51. The next step would be to find the launch site. The flight profiles we had been shown made it unlikely that—at least during prototype testing—the same base could be used for both launches and landings.

We found the critical clue hidden in plain view. An Air Force organization chart used in a congressional briefing identified a launch site called WSMR, the White Sands Missile Range. During the Huntsville technical conference, Verderame would explain its selection. Given its elevation of about 4000 ft., anything launched from WSMR would push through nearly a mile less atmosphere than if launched from the Air Force's facility at Cape Canaveral. So, while a vehicle launched from sea level could lift a 6000-pound payload, one launched from 4000 ft. could lift 10,000 pounds. The signs pointing to WSMR in New Mexico as the new Area 51 seemed almost too clear.

This caused us to take a closer look at the technical information presented at the congressional briefing and Huntsville technical conference. We saw a problem, and it appeared to be a showstopper. Some of the numbers didn't quite add up. The distance between this launch site in New Mexico and Michael AAF in Utah—in the vicinity of 700 miles—was too far a distance for the X-33 to cover during pop-up flights required for 40-minutes-to-anywhere missions.

There was, however, a second Whites Sands launch site—one that wasn't mentioned in either the congressional briefing or the Huntsville technical conference. It was located about 200 miles from Michael AAF, which fit within pop-up mission flight profiles. What's more, portions of it were at an even higher elevation, closer to 4500 ft., which meant an

even greater payload capacity than possible from the New Mexico site. It is the White Sands Missile Range Utah Launch Complex.

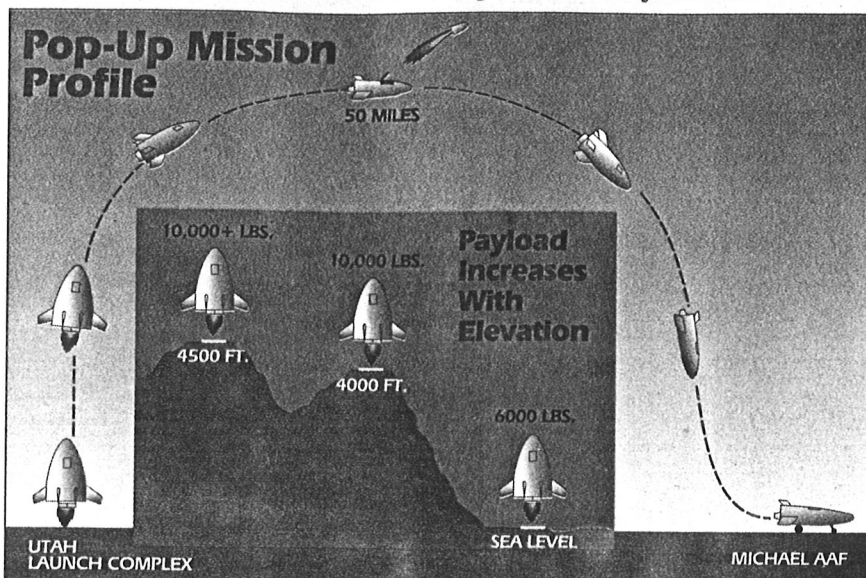
The Utah Launch Complex—which we believe will be the new Area 51—is an even more desolate and forbidding stretch of real estate than Groom Dry Lake Bed. Located south of Utah Route 70 and east of the Green River, it is like the Groom Dry Lake Bed—beneath unlimited-ceiling restricted airspace designated as R-6413. A satellite reconnaissance expert who examined images of the site told PM, "If you wanted to hide something [from satellite imagery], this would be the perfect place to do it."

To get a closer look at the terrain, we contacted Aerial Images, the American firm that sells satellite photos taken by former Soviet spy satellites. The company was at first willing to sell us higher-resolution images. But after analysts in Moscow re-

The opposition was swift and intense, mostly from environmentalists and other outdoors lovers who worried about the possibility of missiles falling on recreational areas in the vicinity of Moab, to the south. Citing this opposition, the Pentagon announced it would drop the project.

PM has, however, obtained copies of other government documents, including budgets, that show \$8.2 million has been allocated to refurbish the missile assembly building and improve the surrounding site at the Utah Launch Complex. Curiously, these funds will be paid by DOE, the successor to the old AEC, whose nuclear testing blanketed the old Area 51 with radioactive fallout.

Part of the public's fascination with the original Area 51 is its rich collection of stories about crashed flying saucers, alien bodies and unexplained lights in the sky. The relocation of



viewed the closeups we had requested, we received a call from the company saying that the images would be unavailable for "security reasons."

We didn't need satellite images to see that the Utah site made the perfect location for the new Area 51. The basic infrastructure for launching the Air Force's next-generation aircraft is already in place, as a result of the complex having been built for the rocket testing in the early days of the military space program.

With our sights focused on Utah, we also found recent evidence of the Pentagon's interest in the site. Two years ago, just as activity at the original Area 51 began to wind down, the Pentagon began testing the local waters to gauge the public reaction to the complex's reactivation. It floated a trial-balloon story that it planned to reactivate the base for missile flights southward to WSMR in New Mexico.

Area 51 does not necessarily mean those tales will be left behind when operations begin here in Utah, perhaps as early as 1999.

The *Air Force Times* reports that the distinctively painted CT-43 transports, which previously flew workers between Area 51 to a depot at the edge of McCarran Airport in Las Vegas, have begun making flights to Utah. And not far away from the new Area 51, millionaire Robert M. Bigelow, the prominent financier of paranormal and UFO research, has just purchased the 480-acre Sherman ranch for the site of the National Institute for Discovery Science. Its mission: to conduct scientific studies of the crop circles, cattle mutilations and other bump-in-the-night phenomena that the folks in these parts have been reporting for decades. So there should be no shortage of fascinating speculation for years to come. **PM**