

Area 51 and aliens: the myth, the meme, and the strange reality, explained

It's been 30 years since the public first heard about Area 51. Here's why UFO hunters are still obsessed.

By [Alex Ward](#) and [Aja Romano](#) Sep 19, 2019, 10:00am EDT



Graffiti reportedly spotted near Rachel, Nevada ahead of the September 20, 2019 Area 51 meetup [Marc Piñana Benet](#) / Facebook

Thousands of people are expected to travel to desert towns in Nevada this weekend, inspired by a viral call to “[storm Area 51](#)” in hopes of overpowering the US military and uncovering whatever government secrets might be hiding there.

The desert base, which is entirely off-limits to civilians, has long been at the center of a conspiracy among alien fans and ufologists — people who hunt for UFOs. Somewhere amid Area 51’s vast desert acreage, they believe, is a heavily guarded underground lab where the government keeps and studies captured alien aircraft — and possibly even aliens themselves. This belief that Area 51’s “military base” is a cover for alien research has been fully mythologized by pop culture over the years, becoming an entrenched part of alien lore.

But those who arrive hoping to find parked flying saucers and green alien bodies laid out on cold metal tables will surely be disappointed, for two reasons. The first is that local authorities surely won't let anyone near the secretive site in Nevada.

“Any attempt to access a federal installation illegally is highly discouraged,” a spokesperson for the Nellis Air Force Base that runs Area 51 told Vox. “Those who trespass on a federal installation without proper authority will be apprehended until they can be turned over to the appropriate law enforcement authorities and are subject to local and federal penalties and prosecution.”

The second is that Area 51 is home to the nation's overhead surveillance program — and most likely nothing else. Starting in the 1950s, it's where some of the most important spying aircraft in American history was assembled, tested, and ultimately sent out on missions. Experts say it likely remains an area for the Air Force and US spy agencies to develop the next generation of aircraft and other weapons of war.

It's no wonder then that the secrets of Area 51 are buried so deeply. But the lack of information about what actually goes on at Area 51 has allowed the many rumors and myths about the site to flourish. These myths have brought many Americans to believe that they deserve to know about whatever's happening there.

Here's a guide to the persisting myths — and the military reality — of Area 51.

Area 51 is the “birthplace of overhead espionage”

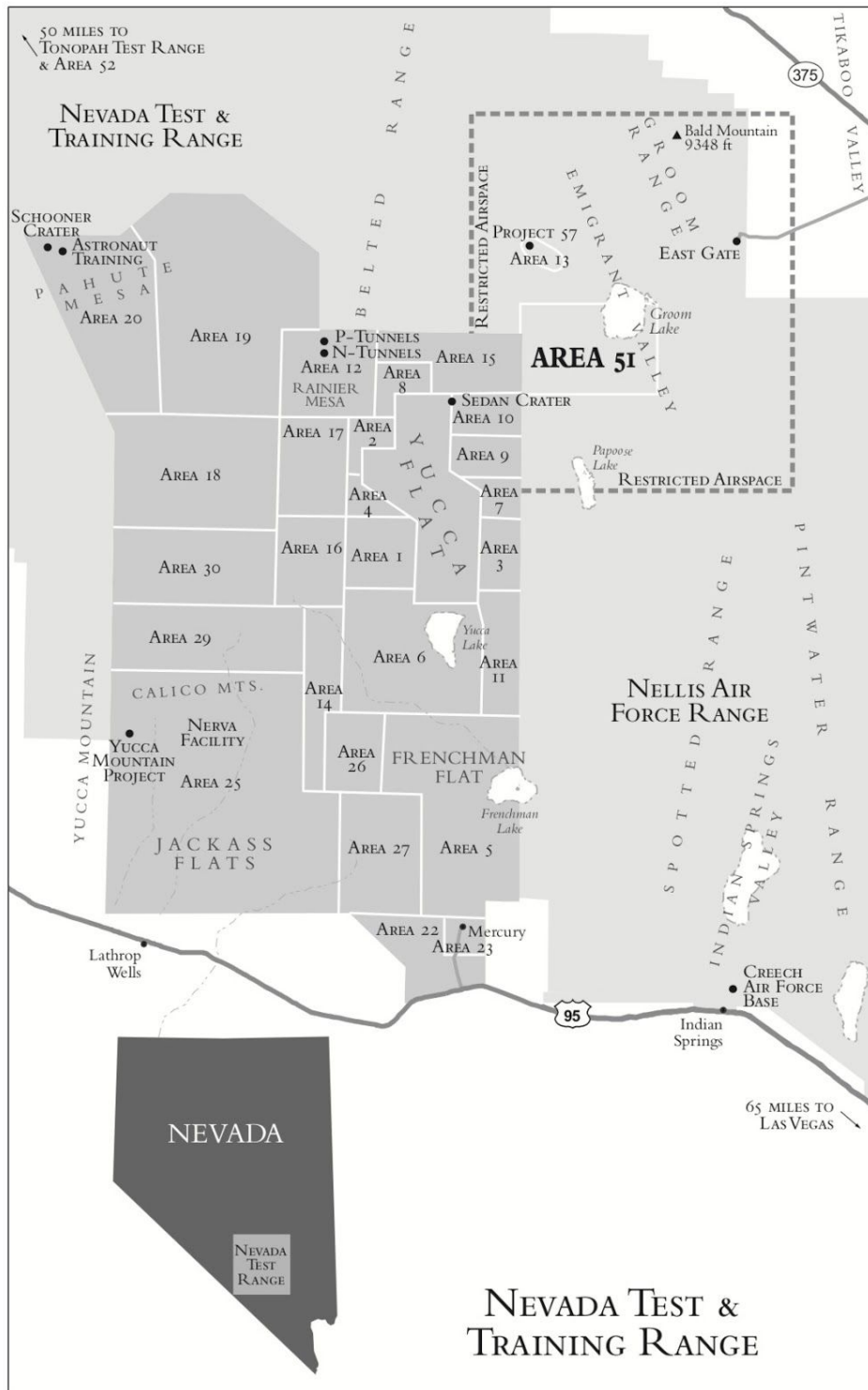
The first thing to know about Area 51 is that it's big. Located 120 miles northwest of Las Vegas, it's contained within the Air Force-operated [Nevada Test and Training Range](#) — a huge, government-controlled piece of land (“the largest contiguous air and ground space available for peacetime military operations in the free world,” according to the NTTR itself) that's roughly the size of Connecticut.

There is very little there, not much more than desert far away from modern conveniences like cell reception. That is by design: In 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower asked for a secret location in which to start a high-altitude reconnaissance program. Two CIA staffers embarked on an expedition to find a remote, secret location in which to test new spy planes that could see into the Soviet Union's burgeoning nuclear weapons program. They soon found what they were looking for.

“They discovered the perfect fulfillment of the presidential request which was a secret base centered around a dry lakebed in the middle of Nevada that happened to be located in an already classified facility where the government was exploding nuclear weapons,”

says Annie Jacobsen, who wrote the book Area 51: An Uncensored History of America's Top Secret Military Base. "There was no way that anyone was going to try to get into this facility, especially because nuclear bombs were being exploded there."

It wasn't long before a mix of engineers, spies, and uniformed military turned the facility into the "birthplace of overhead espionage for the CIA," Jacobsen says.



Courtesy of Annie Jacobsen.

Two aircrafts most exemplify the important work done at Area 51.

The first is the [U-2 spy plane](#), which helped the US keep an eye on the growing nuclear threat out of the Soviet Union.

The Soviets conducted their first atomic bomb test in 1949 and started to intercept aircraft heading toward its borders in part to keep that program secret. That made it nearly impossible for the US to get an overhead view of what was going on inside the country, especially since America still didn't have satellites that could offer a clear picture.

In 1953, the Air Force began looking for a plane that could fly so high it could avoid detection and anti-aircraft missiles, about 70,000 feet in the air, and travel long-enough distances — 3,000 miles or so — without needing to refuel. Oh, and it needed to carry 700 pounds' worth of cameras on it that could provide good resolution of the land below.

Eisenhower directed a covert program through the CIA, known as "[Project Aquatone](#)" to build such an aircraft. The defense contractor [Lockheed Martin](#) designed and built one, the U-2, in just [eight months](#). [Flight tests](#) then began at Area 51 on August 1, 1955, and the program had a budget of around \$22 million, which in today's money would be about \$207 million. Such funds and presidential backing allowed engineers and others to work out many of the initial kinks.

They would do so, turning the U-2 into one of the most important planes in US intelligence and military history. On a July 4, 1956 mission, for example, Hervey Stockman flew the U-2 deep into Soviet territory. The photos he took revealed that the country was actually not as militarily advanced as the nation's leadership at the time claimed, giving the US the knowledge that it wasn't so behind the Soviet Union in military strength.

But on May 1, 1960, a [U-2 plane was shot down over Soviet airspace](#). The pilot, Gary Powers, and plane were both recovered, forcing the US to admit it was spying. That led the government, particularly the Air Force, to put pressure on Lockheed Martin to build a plane in only 20 months that couldn't be brought down.

That eventually led to the development of the [SR-71 Blackbird](#), which [began flight testing on December 22, 1964](#). It would feature so many new, high-tech equipment that aircraft designer [Kelly Johnson](#) said "everything had to be invented. Everything." Labeled by many as the "perfect spy plane," it was so capable that it could fly about 80,000 feet high at a speed of over 2,100 miles per hour — too high and too fast for enemies to take out of the sky.

It was [around that time](#) that the testing area for these aircraft became known as Area 51. More hangars, runways, housing units, and other facilities were installed in order to keep a burgeoning, secret spy-plane program running. But because the US government was making aircraft for the express purpose of beating the Soviet Union and others technologically, secrecy was of the utmost importance. It was the Cold War, after all.

Here are just a couple of examples of what they did: Employees mostly used planes to travel in and out of the facility. According to the [CIA](#), components used to create the U-2 would be disassembled, placed on a plane, and then reassembled on-site at Area 51. The CIA also [encouraged the myth that UFOs were flying around Area 51](#) because it helped obfuscate what was really going on: the testing of odd-looking, high-flying, lightning-fast, never-before-seen aircraft.

The secrecy continues to this day, and what goes on there is jealously guarded. Among other ways to minimize public knowledge, there's a [secret airline](#) that carries passengers to and from the site on nonstop flights every day. Area 51 also has security contractors known as "[Cammo Dudes](#)," who, well, wear camouflage and ride around in white, unmarked pickup trucks in order to spot people trying to enter the facilities.

But some activities that happen there are known. Jacobsen [told Vox](#) that the US military will train foreign fighters there sometimes, allowing the troops to practice on rough, remote terrain well out of sight of the public. She also believes Area 51 remains a place for American armed forces to develop and test the next generation of aircraft and weapons of war.

If you were able to enter Area 51, you'd be more likely to find the next super plane instead of aliens — but that hasn't stopped the alien myth from persisting.

Area 51's association with aliens is actually pretty understandable

Once you start thinking about the specifics of Area 51's purpose, its connection to alien lore becomes clear.

Remember, it's not just a mysterious military training compound. Area 51 is also a place devoted to tactical air maneuvers and counterintelligence, and it's [right next to](#) a nuclear testing site. What kinds of things commonly get mistaken for UFOs? [Stealth bombers and drones](#), military [decoy flares](#), [weapons tests](#), [military training exercises](#), and [weird classified air stuff](#). What does Area 51 have a lot of? All of the above.

Additionally, many of Area 51's counterintelligence efforts are focused on examining and reverse-engineering foreign air technology. In an infamous [1989 interview](#) with Las Vegas news station KLAS, "whistleblower" Bob Lazar alleged a potential link between Area 51

and aliens, making KLAS the very first mainstream outlet to report the connection. But Lazar believed that the foreign air technology belonged to aliens and that Area 51 was entirely designed to capture, reverse-engineer, and study alien aircraft and aliens themselves.

Rumors of Area 51's connection to aliens had been swirling before Lazar's interview, ever since the publication in 1980 of *The Roswell Incident* by Charles Berlitz and William Moore. The book examined the 1947 incident in Roswell, New Mexico, when a mysterious object, cheekily covered by the media as a "[flying saucer](#)" but disavowed by the military as a weather balloon, sparked mild, but not wild, public interest. In 1994, the government ultimately revealed the object to have been a [nuclear surveillance balloon](#). Berlitz and Moore's 1980 book, however, tapped into the '80s zeitgeist of [occult paranoia](#) by alleging a complex government UFO cover-up, and while they didn't explicitly mention Area 51, rumors of vast, labyrinthine underground military compounds in the desert began to take shape.

Conspiracists like John Lear, a pilot and heir to the Learjet fortune, spun macabre and bizarre stories about aliens being held and studied in such underground camps, where the government fed them abducted children and mutilated cattle. In 1987, Lear [described](#) Groom Lake, Nevada — a.k.a. Area 51 — as "one of this nation's most secret test centers." Lear alleged the facility had been built with the assistance of aliens themselves, which Lear described as tall specimens he termed "Greys." Not long after this, Lear met Lazar and referred KLAS journalist George Knapp to Lazar as an Area 51 scientist.

Lazar is believed to have [fabricated](#) his educational background, [making up degrees](#) from MIT and Cal Tech, institutes he seems to have [never attended](#). He also claimed to have worked for the Los Alamos particle laboratory during years when bankruptcy filings instead [listed him](#) as a photo and film processor. Nonetheless, when he appeared on KLAS he was calm and articulate as he spoke of dismantling and test-flying flying saucers at Area 51.

And once he put the idea in the public's mind, it never really faded. Between Lazar's initial interview and the present day, conspiracy theories about Area 51's alien population have grown more and more elaborate, and they have shown up all over pop culture in movies like the [Independence Day](#) franchise and TV shows like [The X-Files](#). As late as 2011, new claims and conspiracies about Area 51 were still finding their way into the mainstream. Even Jacobsen, who would later become a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for her 2016 book *The Pentagon's Brain*, played a role; though she won acclaim for her Area 51 book, it also garnered skepticism from some reviewers because of its conclusion.

After compiling a thoroughly researched history of the site from interviews and historical records, Jacobsen's book ends by [repeating a ludicrous conspiracy claim](#), made to her by an anonymous source who claimed to have worked on a top-secret Area 51 project. The source told her that a Nazi doctor surgically enlarged the heads of abducted teenagers to make them resemble aliens, supposedly on the order of Joseph Stalin, who the source says forced the teenagers to pilot flying saucers over the US as a Cold War scare tactic. But instead of prompting a [War of the Worlds-ish](#) national panic, Jacobsen's source says the fake alien teens ultimately crash-landed in New Mexico, in the famous Roswell incident. Then, he claims, the remains of the crash were brought back to Area 51.

While no evidence of Nazis creating fake UFOs for Stalin — or of federal cooperation with aliens — has ever come to light, the US government does have a long history of investigating reported UFO sightings. These investigations [date back to 1947](#) and include focused studies like [Project Blue Book](#), which covered, among other things, the [first reported record of alleged alien abduction](#), in 1961.

Much more recently, the Pentagon revealed in 2017 that between 2007 and 2012, longtime Nevada Senator Harry Reid shepherded [a Department of Defense program](#) that investigated reports of flying saucers — one that conveniently also lined the pockets of his friend and UFO truther Robert Bigelow, whose research company received most of the \$22 million the program cost to run. None of this investigative work directly implicates or involves Area 51, but it's easy to see how a giant mysterious desert military zone can fuel speculation, especially when you know the government isn't not investigating aliens.

For most people, Area 51's alien lore is just a small aspect of a broader public fascination with the potential existence of aliens and UFOs — mysterious, but probably not sinister. But every good government conspiracy involves something spinning wildly out of control — and with this summer's Area 51 meme, that's just what happened.

The resurgence in Area 51 interest is timely for several reasons

Renewed interest in Area 51 didn't just pop up out of nowhere. Ufology — the study of UFOs — has been enjoying a banner moment lately. In 2019, reports of UFO sightings have been [happening at a staggering rate](#), with some recent ones coming from [reputable members of the US Navy](#). In June, [Congress even looked into navy pilot UFO sightings](#), and while no alien presence has been confirmed, it's clear that advances in technology, aeronautics, surveillance equipment, military stealth devices, drones, and more are making the skies more interesting.

On June 20, 2019, the libertarian-flavored podcast *The Joe Rogan Experience*, one of [the most popular podcasts](#) in existence, [published a two-hour-long interview](#) with Bob Lazar

and filmmaker Jeremy Corbell. Throughout the interview, Lazar mostly repeats and embellishes his original story about aliens at Area 51, as told to KLAS in 1989. He also adds details to explain his apparently fabricated academic and job history, claiming that nebulous government entities seem to have made his birth certificate, employment records, and college transcripts disappear.

The Joe Rogan interview took place in conjunction with the arrival to Netflix Corbell's 2018 documentary on Lazar, *Bob Lazar: Area 51 & Flying Saucers*. The documentary was critically panned for its production values and lack of skepticism toward Lazar, his suspicious academic and professional credentials, and the entirely unverified claims he made. Instead, in both the documentary and on Rogan's podcast, Corbell effusively backs Lazar's claims and tries to frame him as a trailblazing believer of alien technology. For example, Corbell and Lazar argue that one UFO tracked by the government in 2004, dubbed by UFO hunters as the "Tic Tac UFO," bore a resemblance to a craft Lazar claimed to have spotted while working at Area 51.

While neither the podcast interview nor Corbell's documentary provides any proof to substantiate Lazar's claims, they seem to have found a receptive audience. Corbell's film received breathlessly credulous write-ups in some parts of the media, while Joe Rogan fans seemed awed by the interview. "[Lazar's] story is mind-blowing," one fan wrote about the podcast episode "and could have massive implications [for] technology, our government, and humanity at large."

Matty Roberts, a 21-year-old college student from California, was one of the Joe Rogan fans who heard Lazar's interview. Roberts told Vox in an interview that, because he heard Rogan's interview with Lazar, he had Area 51 on the brain when he came up with the idea to create a joke Facebook "event" to storm Area 51 on September 20. "The origins of the creation of the meme all stem from the Joe Rogan podcast with Bob Lazar," he said. "I wouldn't have had the idea had I not watched it."

The Storm Area 51 event rapidly grew into a real-world festival called Alienstock, slated to be held in the desert town Rachel, Nevada. Roberts, who said he meant the original Facebook event to be an obvious joke, told Vox that "Alienstock has always been more of a cultural movement. It was born out of the curiosity of the internet, and the curiosity surrounding aliens, UFOs, everything like that, and just wanting to gather and throw cool parties." But he apparently had no idea that in theming a party around Area 51, he was tapping into a subject that was on the minds of many fellow alien fans.

The rest, as they say, is history — or will be, as long as whatever happens in Nevada this weekend doesn't become the target of a government cover-up. Roberts eventually backed

out of his initial plans for Alienstock and is now putting on a free concert in nearby Las Vegas instead; he recommends that people interested in “the whole UFO thing” attend a different event called Basecamp at the nearby Alien Research Center, a cheeky tourist shop in Hiko, Nevada. (Jeremy Corbell will be one of the speakers on hand.) But thousands of people are still booked into small towns throughout the area for the weekend, and it’s likely that some attempt at “storming” will still take place. (Two Dutch YouTubers have already gotten arrested for trespassing.)

Will Storm Area 51 reveal what aliens look like up close and personal? Unlikely. Will the military be forced to take action against unwanted visitors? Perhaps. But until people feel like they know what really goes on at Area 51, fascination with the site won’t stop.