



[THE PRACTICAL SKEPTIC MICK WEST

Mick West, a writer and investigator, is the creator of the Metabunk.org website and author of *Escaping the Rabbit Hole*. He is a Committee for Skeptical Inquiry fellow.

UFOs: Beliefs, Conspiracies, and Aliens



*Editor's note: With this issue we are pleased to welcome a new regular columnist, writer and investigator (and CSI Fellow) Mick West, creator of the Metabunk.org website and author of *Escaping the Rabbit Hole*.*

You might not think of the topic of UFOs as being a conspiracy theory. After all, who is allegedly conspiring? Are aliens plotting to buzz people on isolated roads in the middle of the night or to hover just beyond camera distance near U.S. Navy battle groups? UFOlogists (people who study UFOs) will dismiss talk of conspiracy and tell you their interest is purely scientific—there are unidentified objects in the sky, and they are trying to figure out what they are.

But interest in UFOs (a.k.a. unidentified aerial phenomena, or UAPs) almost invariably comes along with some kind of conspiracy theory. To understand why, we must look at the other unspoken belief (or at least exceedingly strong suspicion) that UFOlogists have: that UFOs are related to aliens—creatures from another planet.

“Who mentioned aliens?” is a common refrain when I mention aliens, often followed by something like: “Nobody said aliens but you. Why are you trying to discredit UFOs by associating them with aliens?” This kneejerk response to the word *aliens* is a reaction to the perceived stigma associated with being a believer in visiting extraterrestrials. Coverage of UFOs, even now in

the middle of a firestorm of high-level publicity, has always been accompanied in the media by chuckles, raised eyebrows, tones of strained credulity, and jokes about little green men and alien probes.

UFOlogists recognize this, and some try to focus instead on a “science”- or “national security”-based take on the topic. There are, they claim, proven craft flying around in the air at speeds and accelerations impossible with current human technology. They are not saying it’s aliens, but should we not look into it? We might learn something, and the UFOs might be dangerous.

Former U.S. Senator Harry Reid took this tack when he wrote about what stirred his interest in the topic,

starting twenty-five years ago (Reid 2021):

One day in 1996, I received a call from George Knapp. ... “Harry,” he said, “there’s something you have to attend.” He invited me to an upcoming conference that would focus on what the U.S. government generally refers to as “unidentified aerial phenomena,” but what most other people simply call U.F.O.s.

... A large conference room at the event was filled with academics, interested members of the public and, yes, a few oddballs. I was very impressed with the academics, who spoke of unidentified aerial phenomena in the language of science, discussing the issue in terms of technological advancement and national security. I was hooked.

A savvy politician, Reid is quite explicit in distancing himself from the “few oddballs” and from conspiracies:

I believe it’s crucial to lead with the science when studying U.F.O.s. Focusing on little green men or conspiracy theories won’t get us far. Of course, whatever the science tells us, some portion of the public will continue to believe in the reality of otherworldly UFOs as a matter of faith. Ultimately, the UFO debate can be broken down into a sincere belief in science versus a sincere belief in extraterrestrials. I side with science.

Despite being ostensibly level-headed, Reid’s UFOlogy origin story and subsequent actions veer directly into alien territory. His friend George Knapp was (and still is) very much a believer in aliens, having built a considerable segment of his career in promoting the claims of Area 51 confabulator Bob Lazar as factual. Lazar claims to have worked on and even flown actual alien flying saucers. Another friend of Reid is Robert Bigelow, a millionaire motel mogul who pivoted later in life into aerospace and the study of UFOs and the paranormal (Scoles 2018). Bigelow is very much a believer in alien visitors. When asked about them in 2017, he said “There has been and there is an existing presence, an E.T. presence. ... You don’t have to go anywhere. ... It’s just, like, right under people’s noses.”

Harry Reid went on to create the small government program called the

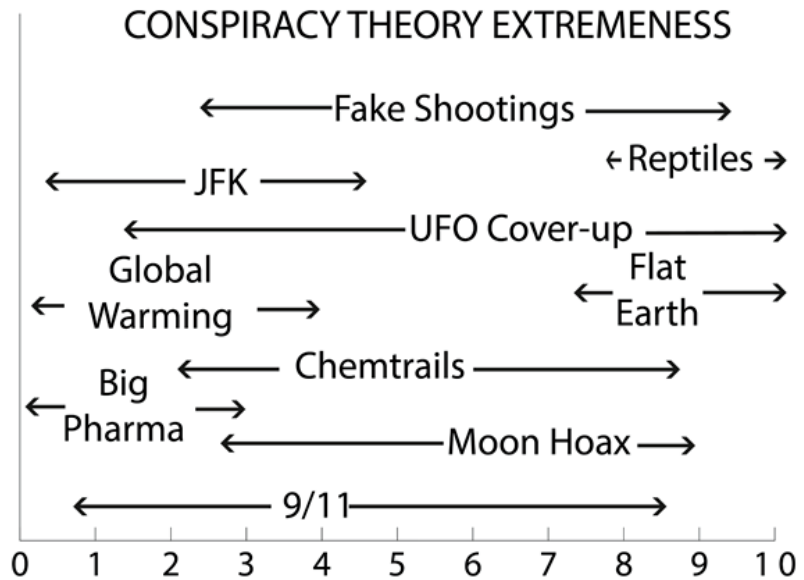


Figure 1. The Conspiracy Theory Extremeness Spectrum

Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP). Ostensibly, this was to study possible developments in aerospace technology over the next few decades. Behind the scenes, the program included some studies of UFOs with the assumption that they represented alien technology from which we could learn. The Pentagon put the program out to tender. One person applied and was awarded the \$22 million contract; that person was Reid’s friend Robert Bigelow (Bender 2021).

Reid and Bigelow’s program largely fizzled out after five years, but it seems to have inspired a new generation. One of the most vocal current voices in UFOlogy, Luis Elizondo, who had a somewhat unclear involvement with AATIP and Reid, resigned from the Pentagon in 2017 and improbably joined forces with Tom DeLong (of the band Blink-182), Chris Mellon (a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence), and others to form the To the Stars Academy to investigate and promote UAPs.

DeLonge has had long, eccentric, and vocal support for the ET hypothesis. Elizondo and Mellon were initially somewhat more restrained, but in the second season of their History Channel show *Unidentified: Inside America’s UFO Investigation*, both expressed strong suspicion that it might be something like aliens. Elizondo stated in June 2021

that UFOs might come “from outer space, from inner space, or from the space in-between.” Mellon said a month earlier that “ET/UT” (extraterrestrials or ultraterrestrials) were, in his mind, a probable explanation for some UFO encounters.

Who is saying UFOs might be aliens? *Everyone is.*

The Conspiracy Spectrum

In my book *Escaping the Rabbit Hole*, I explained that conspiracy theories exist on a spectrum. There are mundane theories, such as politicians being bribed or corporate corruption. Then we move to more extreme theories, such as the U.S. government being responsible for planning 9/11 or spraying “chemtrails” on us from high-flying planes. At the far end of the spectrum, we get the fantastical theories, such as flat-earth or shape-shifting child-eating lizards ruling the planet. I drew a somewhat *ad hoc* diagram to reflect this range (see Figure 1).

Any given labeled conspiracy does not simply sit at one position in the spectrum. They each span a range of extremeness for that individual theory. Chemtrails, for example, range from a two (secret modifications to jet fuel to increase cloudiness to help with global warming) to a nine (government spraying nanobots to take over our brains).

The theory with the widest spread is the “UFO cover-up” theory, going from one to ten. This spread was something I was not entirely sure of at the time, because I had done only basic research into the topic. But subsequent events, the research those events prompted, and the people I have talked to have all borne out the assessment of UFOs as a full-spectrum conspiracy theory.

Before we dive into that spectrum, I want to explain why understanding is essential. It’s all about communication. Effective communication requires an accurate shared understanding even when there is disagreement. It is very tempting to put a label on someone and then either dismiss or attack them based on some preconceived notion of what that label means. If you think UFO enthusiasts are obsessed with abductions and crop circles when they are actually just thinking the government is experimenting with technology from a recovered flying saucer, then you will not have a productive conversation. Conversely, if they think UFOs are angelic beings from another dimension, then talking about the Drake equation, or the absence of sonic booms, is unlikely to make much of an impact. We need to figure out where we all are on the spectrum so we don’t end up talking past each other.

Understanding the spectrum is essential in understanding what has been going on in recent months with the government’s UAP task force, the leaked videos, and the expectations of, and reaction to, the UAP report that was released in June 2021. Each individual will react differently based on where they are on the UFO conspiracy spectrum.

Let’s start at the mundane end. Ranking somewhere between zero and one is the simple idea that the government (and here we generally focus on the U.S. government) has some evidence of anomalous objects, does not fully understand what that evidence shows, and is very loosely conspiring to cover up the fact that they don’t know. This simple barely-a-conspiracy theory is generally what many UFO enthusiasts profess to believe. No mention is made of aliens.

There’s no need to even invoke much in the way of nefarious intent, beyond an unwillingness of the government to admit its failings. There’s a simple, almost benign puzzle (what are UFOs?) that they feel is just not getting the attention it deserves.

But the stakes rapidly escalate for the majority of UFO enthusiasts. Most, in my experience, believe that “the phenomenon” (an overinclusive term that in reality covers a panoply of diverse and largely unconnected events) has been going on for seventy or more years. The government has had ample opportunity over those years to gather data. So the conspiracy becomes a more fully fledged cover-up. The government allegedly knows that UFOs are “real” but won’t tell the public.

What the government knows and is conspiring to keep from us varies by individual. Many think that the government has recovered material from a crashed alien craft. Roswell springs to mind, but we also have the tale told by Bob Lazar of how multiple flying saucers were recovered at an archaeological site and were being experimented with (and flown) at Area 51. We are now coming toward the middle of the UFO conspiracy spectrum. More extreme—but still not the most extreme—are the theories of a cover-up of actual alien contact: alien bodies were possibly recovered from crashed saucers, autopsies were allegedly performed. Live aliens have been rumored to exist, perhaps in secret underground military bases.

Then there are the *really* extraordinary beliefs—so extraordinary that it seems incongruous to talk about them in the same breath as a government cover-up. Some posit alien abductions happen regularly to thousands, if not millions, of people who are spirited away from their beds, examined, implanted, and returned with no trace it ever happened. It seems impossible for the government *not* to be aware this is happening. Yet it seems equally improbable that they would be able to cover it up.

Finally, we delve into the mystical and the metaphysical. UFOs are angels or demons. The conspiracy cover-up is because the military is afraid of pro-

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voking the demons (Colavito 2021). Or they are not precisely aliens in the traditional sense but some kind of interdimensional entity, “ultraterrestrials” (secretive magical creatures from Earth) or even time-traveling humans, possibly tourists. In more imaginative interpretations, many UFO sightings are faked by interdimensional travelers to cover up their presence. In this case, the aliens *are* the ones who are conspiring.

As a skeptic, I often talk to people who have beliefs I think are wrong, and I try to help them see the truth. It is vitally important when we make such an attempt that we ensure we understand what they believe—and how extreme that belief is—before wading in with facts and logic. This understanding is essential when dealing with new information, such as the government’s UFO report. It contains no evidence of aliens, and that absence will be taken by many as evidence of conspiracy. To have a useful conversation about this, you need to understand *which* conspiracy. ■

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