

Paranoia and Popular Culture in Cold War America



Sam Burton  
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Readers  
John Rector  
Peter Callero

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History teaches that the unknown fills hearts with fear and paranoia. Myths abound with this general feature in mind. Whether it is an abominable snowman or lizard like sea monsters the theme tends to be the same. People often react to mystery by creating a fantasy and passing it off for the truth. Possibly there was never anything there at all to explain, just the figments of a disillusioned mind. Possibly this could explain everything that is strange and misunderstood. Human beings are often forced to deal with the idea that there are elements of this world that are beyond the realm of modern science.

One thing is certain; myths are defined by their times. What was mythology for the ancient Greeks would be foolish to think of today. The idea that lightening comes from Zeus and that Apollo drags the sun across the sky is to us an obvious fairytale. Modern science allows us to see our world in a different way. We know why the sun moves and lightening happens, but there is a reason the Greeks didn't have any stories about UFOs. Such an idea is relevant to us because we live in the rocket age. Interplanetary travel is not that extraordinary. People have been to the moon. We send satellites to other planets. Spacemen are real to us.

This paper does not intend to focus on the reality of UFOs or their likelihood. What this paper will discuss is how paranoia mixed with conspiracy theories came to dominate this period in American history. With this we see a dramatic rise in the amount of UFO sightings. Science fiction tales of the time period helped to push this along. Thereby it worked its way into every part of post-World War II society. Why did this happen? What were the elements that gave birth to this phenomenon? This paper will aim to show that paranoia caused by the Cold War environment worked to create these aspects of popular culture.

Several author's viewpoints developed this argument. One collection of essays is the *UFO Phenomena and the Behavioral Scientist* edited by Richard F. Haines written by psychologists regarding the UFO phenomenon. These authors work to show how paranoia can causes people to do strange things. Essentially the UFO phenomena, according to them, becomes a natural paranoid reaction to the situation.

Another book paints a slightly different picture. It is entitled *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Post-War America* by Timothy Melley. The main thesis of this book centers on the cold war and the culture of conspiracy that developed from it. There are three main factors discussed in the book that contributed to this

phenomenon. They are the post-war transformation to a post-industrial society, religious fundamentalism, and fear of nuclear war. These three factors formed a powerful mix in those emotionally charged days.

There are also some people who refute all of these claims. To them UFOs are real and not a cultural phenomenon. One such source is the aptly named *Direct Encounters* by Judith and Alan Gansberg. In essence they give accounts of real people who sighted UFOs in an effort to convince the reader of the truth. They never look at these sightings as anything but a real event.

Sightings began to rise after what came to be known as the Roswell incident. Many believe that an alien craft crashed outside Roswell, NM in June of 1949. Enthusiasts believe that the Air Force staged a cover up to conceal this fact from the public. *The Roswell Report: Case Closed* written by Captain James McAndrew is the Air Force's official account of the Roswell incident. It refutes the claims of UFO enthusiasts. The book gives examples of the types of experiments that the military conducted during the 40s and 50s. Captain McAndrew feels that a closer examination of the data can explain everything.

Along this same line another book entitled *Messengers of Deception* by Jacques Vallee deals with people who

disseminate false information in order to further the UFO phenomenon. Vallee is interesting because he believed in UFOs, but now has changed his mind. Vallee was involved with UFO research for years. He even worked with NASA for a time. The claim he makes is that after all the evidence is weighed it doesn't add up. This will be important hereafter.

The rising UFO phenomenon also influenced the popular entertainment of the time period. A collection of articles edited by John Orr and Olga Taxidou entitled *Post-War Cinema and Modernity* provides a look into the changes that occurred in Cold War American films. The Cold War gave rise to two large genres of film. They are Science Fiction, and Spy Thrillers. Both of these genres offer a window into the Cold War culture.

How the future is presented in science fiction films also changed and evolved during the Cold War. Stephen Hantke in his article *Technological Environments in Alien Films* analyzes this fact. He looks at several films and notes evolving characteristics of science fiction as the cold war progressed. His main examples are *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Star Wars*, and the *Alien* films.

To establish the premise, a history of UFOs is important to show the pattern that these sightings followed

over time. Nineteenth century reports of UFOs are virtually non-existent until the final decade of that century.<sup>1</sup> During this time telescopes were improving, and sightings of unusual aerial phenomenon were commonplace. UFO expert Jerome Clark is quick to conclude, however, that there is nothing that proves this was anything but meteorological and astronomical phenomena.<sup>2</sup> The accounts during this time tend to be so outrageous that even the avid UFO believers think that they are without substance. This would all change when in the fall of 1896 a wave of unidentified "airship" sightings began in California.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the idea of an airship was still an impractical device in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This must have made the sightings even more extraordinary. With this event began the modern UFO era. Sightings continued for decades afterwards.

In another essay, Clark goes deeper into this early period of UFO history. He calls the UFO phenomenon a "recent historical occurrence, apparently no more than two centuries old."<sup>4</sup> He adds accounts of cowboys in the old west seeing objects fall from the sky with hairless humanoid creatures inside. This does in fact inspire a certain degree of curiosity. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century flying ships did not exist. This begs the question as to how these

people could have imagined something like that? Jacques

Vallee answers this question by stating:

The belief in UFO contact, and the expectation of visitation by beings from space, is promoted by certain groups of people. I call them Manipulators, by which I mean the people who are responsible for promoting UFO contacts, for circulating faked photographs, for interfering with witnesses and researchers, and for generating systematic disinformation about the phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

With this Vallee is suggesting that paranormal phenomenon tends to have people involved with it that wish to promulgate these stories. They change the stories to make them more interesting, even as far as outright lying. This could explain how this information circulates.

One example of this is the 1930's famous "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast that announced an alien invasion. The broadcast turned out to be an elaborate hoax. This is an excellent example of UFOs entering mainstream life in ways they hadn't before. In part, this was due to the manipulators efforts to disseminate this information to the masses.

World War II brought its share of sightings including the widely debated, "Battle of Los Angeles," that occurred on February 25, 1942. According to UFO enthusiasts, and Jerome Clark, on that date a flying saucer floated over Los

Angeles causing a panic among military personnel that assumed the craft was some advanced enemy airplane.<sup>6</sup> They commenced firing on the object for two straight hours without any affect. Accounts claim that there was one large object with other small objects moving quickly around it. It was immediately thought afterwards that the objects came from Japan. The case was later carefully dismissed, and no further inquiries were made.<sup>7</sup>

By the late 1940's the types and descriptions of UFOs had changed.<sup>8</sup> What was once described as "airships" or dirigibles by the 1940's turned into the famous cigar shaped objects without wings. The concept of a flying saucer came about when a pilot by the name of Kenneth Arnold spotted a group of unidentified aircraft flying over the Cascade Mountains on June 24, 1947.<sup>9</sup> Upon arrival in Pendleton, Oregon he reported this event to the authorities. He said the objects flew like saucers skipping along water. This was then mutated by the press to be flying saucers. The name stuck. In the decades after the 1940's flying saucer accounts were the most common sightings.<sup>10</sup> The science fiction of the period tends to perpetuate this idea.

After World War II the United States entered the Cold War. This was the true starting point for the age of UFOs



and conspiracy theories. The theme of the day in the 1950's was paranoia. Partly to do with the real fear of Soviet attack and with the general distrust of the government. Not surprisingly this time witnessed an increase of UFO sightings. Curtis Peebles author of *Watch the Skies* claims that the flying saucer myth developed over a period of fifty years leading up to its induction into popular culture in 1945.<sup>11</sup> With this we can see how the space era truly affected the public consciousness regarding extraterrestrials. Before fifty years ago, alien visitation of earth was virtually non-existent in the media.<sup>12</sup>

Conspiracy theories abounded during this period. Sociologist Gregory Camp states, "Fear of war, conspiracy suspicion, and hope in the fulfillment of prophesy made for a powerful mix in those emotionally charged days".<sup>13</sup> This was a time of high political drama. Conspiracy theorists also felt that these were all planned objectives orchestrated by a vast conspiracy.<sup>14</sup>

Whether or not a conspiracy existed truly doesn't matter. The fact is the mere idea that something might be going on behind the scenes scared people. Adding to the mix was the Christian prophesy of the return of Christ.<sup>15</sup> This of course would signify the end of the world. The formation of the state of Israel in 1948 only added fuel to the fire.

Camp claims that the formation of Israel and nuclear weapons led many prominent Christian writers to declare that the end was near.<sup>16</sup> Mark Fenster supports this claim by adding:

the proliferation of non-fiction books, videotapes, weekly television shows, and novels relating biblical prophesy to human history and current events demonstrates the ongoing religious and cultural importance of millennialism.<sup>17</sup>

Religious fervor was an important element of cold war paranoia.

Emerging from the ashes of war was an entire new type of people. What Timothy Melley calls "a new line of Americans."<sup>18</sup> A fundamental change occurred in post war America. It was the shift from an age of production to an age of consumption.<sup>19</sup> This is otherwise known as a post-industrial society. Under this system people became increasingly alienated from government bureaucracies. Americans as a people were becoming increasingly generic.<sup>20</sup> This led to the mentality of the lonely American.

The fear of the lonely American was not that the people running the bureaucracies were corrupt, but that the people running the bureaucracies were not truly running them.<sup>21</sup> This means that there is a group of people behind the scenes that decides everything that happens in the world. This could range anywhere from deciding our next

president, or killing our current president in the case of President Kennedy. Melley compares it to a large company that has a public face, but a small group of investors is running it behind the scenes.

The fear of conspiracy leads us into the next topic. When strange sightings began in the late 1940s, people wanted to know what was causing it. There were no direct answers to be found, and the United States government wasn't talking. The silence heightened an aura of suspicion already present in Cold War America. As events unfolded people could only assume that something occurred behind the scenes as an effort to hide what was really happening. This helped to push the UFO phenomenon forward.

Other fundamental features of the cold war that propagated the phenomenon occurred in conjunction. During the pre-WWII era pulp magazines were actively printing stories of alien visitations of Earth and other extraterrestrial tales. As the years after the war progressed, tensions began to escalate between the Soviet Union and the United States. 1949 was the year that the Soviets tested their first nuclear bomb. The Roswell incident was just a short two years old. In fact Roswell along with the adventure tales did much to commercialize the idea of UFOs to the American public.<sup>22</sup> Soviet atomic

bombs added to the scenario by providing the paranoia. Dwelling on Roswell and the late 1940's helps to understand everything that occurred afterward.

Roswell is peculiar in many ways. It seems that from the very beginning the incident was a media frenzy. At the beginning of his book, Smith states:

Roswell the incident was born and bred by the mass media. From its very first breath, in July 1947, when the Associated Press reported in newspapers and radio broadcasts around the globe that a flying saucer had been scooped up in Roswell, New Mexico, then swiftly reported that the saucer wasn't a saucer at all, Roswell wrapped itself around the media.<sup>23</sup>

This was something sold to the public. In order to sell it, reporters have to make it interesting. In their article entitled, *The Popular Culture of Conspiracy/The Culture of Conspiracy*, David Bell and Lee-Jane Bennion-Nixon state that a gripping dramatic story is at the heart of every conspiracy.<sup>24</sup>

The story is that in July 1947 an alien spacecraft crashed outside Roswell, NM. The United States Air Force, for whatever reason, covered it up by saying that the debris found by onlookers was actually one of their high flying weather balloons.<sup>25</sup> Eye witnesses claim that besides the metal debris there were alien bodies at the crash site. The Air Force transported bodies, along with the craft, to

the military base outside Alamogordo, NM. There they performed an autopsy of the Aliens and then transported them to area 51 in northern Nevada. All who were involved were sworn to secrecy.

The Air Force released an official account of the Roswell incident in the 1980s. According to the Air Force, the United States during the late 1940's was sending weather balloons to the edge of the atmosphere and parachuting crash test dummies from high altitude.<sup>26</sup> There is some dispute over the purpose of the balloon flights.<sup>27</sup> Peebles claims that the United States government sent the balloons up to the edge of the atmosphere because they discovered that if you got up high enough you can catch radio waves from around the globe. In other words it was an effort to monitor Soviet communications.

Whatever the purpose was the Air Force did send crash test dummies to the edge of space. Some of these dummies were being sent to about 98,000 feet and dropped.<sup>28</sup> The purpose of this was to see if a human pilot could successfully execute an escape from extreme high altitude. The USAF continued to conduct these same tests throughout the 1950's and early 60's. Concerning the bodies found at the Roswell site the Air Force claims that they were actually a group of these dummies. One surprising aspect is

that the dummies were gray in color, with very little facial features.<sup>29</sup> They were also smaller than the average man. These are typical aspects assigned to extraterrestrial beings today. See the pictures below:



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By adding all these things up, the Air Force concludes that a close comparison of Eye Witness accounts to actual Air Force activities in the area reveals a strong correlation between the two.<sup>32</sup> A crashed weather balloon would seem very strange to people unfamiliar with it. The

balloons were actually several connected balloons. When all stretched out they were about one hundred feet long.<sup>33</sup> The entire bottom of the balloon was made of aluminum. It was also in a saucer like shape. This can account for the metal found at the site. A person coming upon the crash could easily mistake it for any number of things. Plus, once they reported it to the media the entire story became absolutely fantastic and out of this world.

Also, the public was not aware of military tests going on in the area. This is not surprising, due to the fact that the first nuclear weapon was detonated not far from Alamogordo, NM without the public finding out.<sup>34</sup> The military told the people in the area that a power plant exploded. What really happened wasn't known until later. This secrecy only helped to fuel the public's suspicion. The basic conclusion is that the public, fueled by science fiction and a general suspicion of government activities, turned the Roswell incident into something much bigger than it actually was.

Post Roswell brought about more military sightings. It was about this time that the United States attempted to keep the phenomenon hidden.<sup>35</sup> The Air Force launched a study called "Project Blue Book". The purpose was to research the phenomenon and draw conclusions. Reasons for this are

unknown. Most likely they didn't want the public to panic over what they knew nothing about. The project continued till the end of the 1960s when it was abandoned.<sup>36</sup> The Air Force apparently concluded that there wasn't anything to be found.

All this happened during the cold war. As such, everything about UFOs was a potential secret. However it is easy to see why the government involved itself. The United States could not afford to ignore the idea of advanced aircraft patrolling their skies because they didn't know if the aircraft came from Russia. Not surprisingly they wanted to play the spy game and keep it low key. Michael D. Swords writes, "It is the story of a secretive phenomenon (UFOs) interfacing with a secretive human activity (Military Intelligence) at a time of maximum concern and confusion."<sup>37</sup>

With this in mind we can look deeper into the mood of the general public. The biggest war in the history of the world ended in 1945. People were talking about seeing strange aircraft that are fast, amazingly maneuverable, and elusive. The USSR tested their first nuclear bomb in 1949, thereby leveling the playing field between the two nations. This led to a feeling of uncertainty that ruled the day. One of the most terrifying aspects was that people during



the 1950's could only assume that these reports of strange aircraft represented a Soviet threat.

Because of this fear conspiracies began to flood the modern consciousness in a way never before experienced. People began to think that the government hid a considerable amount of information regarding UFOs from the public. As Timothy Melley states in his article, the meaning of the word conspiracy has changed during the cold war to "signify a broad array of social controls."<sup>38</sup> In other words the government was trying to control what we knew and thought through conspiracy. Jodi Dean claims that the mentality of the cold war readied the American public for the mechanism of conspiracy.<sup>39</sup> If this is true then the cold war did more to shape current attitudes about UFOs than any other event.

As an example of a person affected by this mentality, Richard Knight relates the story of Leah Haley.<sup>40</sup> Haley had a dream where she was in a spaceship surrounded by little creatures with large black eyes. She mentions this to her brother and he tells her about a similar occurrence that he read about. The other occurrence involved a woman that had a similar experience to Haley. One peculiar aspect of the story was a spot in the woman's backyard where grass wouldn't grow. Haley stated that there was a similar spot

in her own backyard. Also associated were strange afflictions like burning in the kidneys and the urinary tract. Haley had this checked out by a doctor only to find nothing wrong with her.

In search of the truth, she sought the advice of a hypnotist who told her that hypnosis could reveal suppressed memories. The hypnosis revealed the whole dream was real. In fact, all sorts of things came out during the hypnosis. She found out that she was abducted by aliens during her childhood several times. Many mysteries were unfolded to her. All that she had wondered was revealed. The hypnosis completed her break with reality.

There are reasons why a person would want to identify themselves with UFO abduction. Certain pleasures accompany an abductee's break with conventional reality.<sup>41</sup> All of a sudden they find themselves in the middle of conspiracies with global implications. They get the feeling of being a part of something, or possibly, they sense that they will be remembered as historical figures. Also they win the distinction of no longer being duped by the system. In other words, they derive pleasure from knowing what others do not. The feeling for most abductees is that the reality for the rest of us is only virtual.<sup>42</sup>

A UFO abductee has two major problems in proving their case.<sup>43</sup> First, there is no physical evidence. Second, they are reluctant to believe what happened at first. This proves to be a challenge. They get over it because they alone have the ability to know what is really going on. Dean presents this as an explanation for most abduction stories. The cold war wrapped the United States in a web of conspiracy theories. It created a way for some people to feel important. By becoming a victim of alien abduction a person that was once nothing is now significant. Authors like Richard Haines, never the less would disagree with this theory.

Haines claims that he did a study of mental patients to see how many claimed to have been abducted by aliens.<sup>44</sup> Surprisingly he found that none claimed alien abduction. To Haines this is direct evidence that UFO abductees are not "crazy".<sup>45</sup> This is definitely a worth-while point. However, it does not completely disprove Dean's argument. Dean claims that abductees feel a need to belong to something greater than society, something that essentially makes them feel more important. This does not imply lack of mental health, or "craziness". Therefore, Haines' argument is insufficient.

From its birth the UFO conspiracy affected other aspects of society. Dramatic changes especially occurred in the film industry. John Orr states in his article, *the Cold War and the Cinema of Wonder*, that there were two types of movie genre that arose during this period. They are namely "spy thrillers", and what Orr calls "the irresistible rise of science fiction".<sup>46</sup> Spy thrillers lived for the Cold War. The idea was that there were people trained by the United States government to protect American interests by spying, and killing. The idea that art imitates life fits this scenario perfectly. The US and the Soviet Union did actively spy on each other throughout the cold war. It even reaches the point that Russian cinema produced its own version of James Bond.<sup>47</sup> It might seem that the same pressures affecting the American culture at the time also infiltrated Russian culture.

With spy thrillers out of the way, Science fiction is seen as one of the most prevalent genres of the cold war. Smith draws a correlation between science fiction movies and the Roswell incident.<sup>48</sup> Smith calls this correlation "the Roswell rules". The Roswell rules basically take the stand that every science fiction film featuring alien visitation for the most part occur in the desert, with the military involved. This can be seen in a number of movies.

Smith sites *Invaders from Mars* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as his examples.<sup>49</sup> Both take place in the desert, and both follow the Roswell rules. It seems that for the most part this idea still permeates our consciousness.

Besides the Roswell incident it is possible to draw a correlation between technological advancements during the 1950s and the growing popularity of science fiction. Steffen Hantke states that the 50's were a time of great technological advancement compared to previous decades.<sup>50</sup> As such, the view of the future changed. People began to imagine the future as a wondrous technological utopia where man communicates with extraterrestrial beings while simultaneously flying to distant stars.

There wasn't much reason to doubt this theory. Sputnik entered orbit in 1957. Men were going into space by the early 60's. In 1969 Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. The space of twenty years from 1950 to 1970 had seen our space program go from nothing to human beings walking on the moon. If progress had kept going along these lines the ideas expressed in *2001: A Space Odyssey* wouldn't seem so outrageous to us.

We can see now how programs like *Star Trek* and the movie *2001* came to life. However, science fiction is nothing more than a glorified fairy tale. John Leonard

compares science fiction to tales of goblins and gnomes during the middle ages.<sup>51</sup> This isn't that far of a stretch. After all trolls, goblins, gnomes, fairies, and other creatures used to seize people and transport them to other dimensions where time changed. As stated before, myths are defined by their times. Just a few years after Hiroshima the world's first radiation mutant appeared on movie screens. That mutant was Godzilla. Leonard then states that after Godzilla cold war cinema was full of bad seed aliens, triffids, pods, body snatchers, man eating dandelions, blood sucking vegetables, etc.<sup>52</sup> The rise of the nuclear age dramatically changed the way people looked at the world. Even by changing fantasies.

Other films of the period took a much less positive view of the future. Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien* almost single handedly established a new visual grammar for science fiction films.<sup>53</sup> Suddenly the future was a less glorious place. Films featuring aliens trying to kill people certainly existed before *Alien*. The real difference is how it presented life in the future. *2001* portrayed a clean, sleek view of the future. *Star Trek* appears in the same way. The environments are advanced, and practically perfect.

The spaceship in *Alien* looks more like a garbage truck flying through space. Inside the ship everything looks dirty and claustrophobic.<sup>54</sup> It almost presents the idea that the future will have lots of technology, but it won't make our lives any better. This probably wasn't Ridley Scott's purpose for making the ship that way. The ship is tight and compact to heighten the tension caused by having to fight a vicious animal in a tight space. In other words, it made the movie scary.

This doesn't take away from the fact that many films of this era had a less than positive view of the future. Starting in the 60s with *Planet of the Apes*. This movie presents a future world where nuclear war destroyed the planet and apes now rule Earth in our place. Human beings weren't wiped out by the war. Instead we are the servants of the apes. In fact the humans in the picture are not able to speak. We have become animals while the animals assumed our role.

The central theme then is that technology while allowing us to progress, also sends us on a downward spiral that can only lead to destruction. This is a true born and bred cold war ideology. The people of this time had every reason to believe this. The World Wars wiped out entire generations. The ability to do this came from advanced

military technology. Killing people is a science when it comes to war. Therefore, more military technology can only lead to the death of more people. The atomic bomb represented that threat.

With that in mind it can also be stated that the existence of nuclear devices helped save lives. This was something that people during the cold war would not have predicted. The reality is that the presence of nuclear weapons deterred the United States and the Soviet Union from engaging in a war. Also advanced military technology helps save civilian lives during wars. Precision guided bombs reduce the total amount of people that die by providing the ability to avoid civilian targets. These are all things that people during the cold war could not have predicted.

Other films follow this same concept. The theme is that some type of catastrophic future is destined for humanity. Some examples are Mad Max, Bladerunner, and Waterworld.<sup>55</sup> Each is a product of this same cold war mentality. Bladerunner and Waterworld each deal with environmental catastrophe while Mad Max focuses on a future earth that is barren and unusable. These are not fringe films. These are very much mainstream pictures starring A list actors like Mel Gibson, Harrison Ford, and Kevin



Costner. Many well produced science fiction films continue to flood the entertainment industry. The point is that the American public accepted science fiction as a mainstream entertainment genre during the cold war. This can be directly correlated to cold war paranoia and uncertainty.

Paranoia caused by the cold war environment worked to create aspects of popular culture. These included UFOs, science fiction films, and other various conspiracy theories. Now in the post-Cold War era we continue to promulgate these ideas, thereby showing how ingrained they have become in our culture. Unfortunately the predictions of science fiction have not come true. After landing on the moon more than thirty years ago we have not done anything significant other than send satellites to far away planets.

What we can learn from this is that we can never predict what the future will hold. Most likely conspiracy theories will not go away anytime soon. Mysteries like UFO sightings probably will not be solved any time soon. This can only add to its appeal. Possibly if it were solved it would lose its appeal. The people who want to believe seem to feed off this aura of mystery. Creating a perpetual renewal of the conspiracy. One thing is certain. The cold war paved the way for conspiracy theories to enter the American consciousness. A consciousness that is not static,

but dynamic. Therefore it is open to change. Our theories today may someday seem as ridiculous as lightning from Zeus.

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