

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a person standing on a path at night, looking up at a bright light source partially obscured by a tree branch. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong light source creating a lens flare effect through the branches of a large evergreen tree in the upper right. The person is silhouetted against the dark background, standing on a paved path that leads into a wooded area. The overall mood is mysterious and contemplative.

THE UFO CHRONICLES

HOW SCIENCE FICTION, SHAMANIC EXPERIENCES, AND
SECRET AIR FORCE PROJECTS CREATED THE UFO MYTH

JOHN MICHAEL GREER

THE UFO CHRONICLES

THE UFO CHRONICLES
How Science Fiction, Shamanic
Experiences, and Secret
Air Force Projects Created
the UFO Myth

John Michael Greer

AEON

First published in 2020 by
Aeon Books Ltd
PO Box 76401
London W5 9RG

Copyright © 2020 by John Michael Greer

The right of John Michael Greer to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with §§ 77 and 78 of the Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-1-91280-789-5

Typeset by Medlar Publishing Solutions Pvt Ltd, India
Printed in Great Britain

www.aeonbooks.co.uk

CONTENTS

<i>FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION</i>	vii
<i>INTRODUCTION: A RUMOR OF OTHER WORLDS</i>	ix
PART I: TRACKING THE PHENOMENON	
<i>CHAPTER ONE</i> Before the saucers came, prehistory–1947	3
<i>CHAPTER TWO</i> A mystery in the skies, 1947–1966	27
<i>CHAPTER THREE</i> Waiting for first contact, 1966–1987	53
<i>CHAPTER FOUR</i> Twilight of the saucers, 1987–present	83

PART II: EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES

<i>CHAPTER FIVE</i>	
The barriers to understanding	105
<i>CHAPTER SIX</i>	
The alternative hypotheses	127
<i>CHAPTER SEVEN</i>	
The natural history of apparitions	147

PART III: SOLVING THE MYSTERY

<i>CHAPTER EIGHT</i>	
Summoning the space brothers	169
<i>CHAPTER NINE</i>	
The last secret of the Cold War	181
<i>CHAPTER TEN</i>	
The end of the dream	209
<i>GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS</i>	223
<i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i>	227
<i>NOTES</i>	239
<i>INDEX</i>	251

FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

These days, books on unidentified flying objects are far more common than sightings of UFOs. The days when people could drive to certain locations in North America on warm summer evenings, sit back, and count on seeing unexplained lights move across the heavens, are rapidly fading into folk memory. In a recent book on the UFO phenomenon,¹ religious-studies scholar Donna Pasulka has pointed out that popular ideas about UFOs are tracking the ordinary process by which religions are founded, and she's quite correct. The First Time that every faith passes through, the period of miracles and divine (or alien) visitations, has given way in the usual fashion to an era in which gospels are written and creeds hammered out. Another generation or so, and those gospels and creeds will have replaced the original experiences themselves.

This book is not a contribution to that process. I wrote the original version of it in 2008, after many years of interest in the UFO phenomenon and two years of intensive study of the subject, made easier than it might have been by access to several large collections of UFO literature. In its original form, it was published in 2009 as *The UFO Phenomenon: Facts, Fantasy, and Disinformation*. Sales were respectable

but neither of the two warring sides in the UFO debate so much as admitted its existence. Certain books by major players in the field in the years immediately thereafter, to be fair, did include sidelong references to “secret prototypes or clandestine operations of psychological warfare often recruited by skeptics to ‘explain’ modern UFOs”²—this at a time when self-proclaimed skeptics backed away from such claims as vigorously as true believers in spaceships from distant planets—but that was as close to a review as my book received from either side of the UFO debate.

I expected nothing else, and indeed the last chapter of the book—Chapter 9 in the original, Chapter 10 in this new edition—predicted exactly that response. Sometimes the things that most need saying are the things that those closest to the subject least want to hear. The UFO controversy isn’t relevant only to those people who are fascinated by stories about Roswell, abductions, and big-eyed Grays from Zeta Reticuli, or for that matter, those people who have a stake in denouncing such stories.

Beyond the familiar opposition between those who believe that UFOs are spacecraft from other planets and those who believe UFOs do not exist at all, lies a landscape of stranger and more rewarding topics—the nature of apparitions, the history of secret American aerospace technologies, the mythology of progress, and the role of popular culture in defining experienced reality. Thus when Oliver Rathbone of Aeon Books approached me about the possibility of a revised and expanded version of my UFO book, I leapt at the chance.

No author writes a book alone. I owe thanks for access to collections and other information to Jordan Pease, David Larson, Erskine Payton, and David Spangler, and to the personnel of the Rogue Valley Metaphysical Library, Southern Oregon University’s Hannon Library, and the public libraries of Ashland, Oregon and East Providence, Rhode Island. I am also grateful to Oliver Rathbone of Aeon Books and editor James Darley for their capable help in taking this manuscript once more through the publication process. My thanks go with all.

INTRODUCTION

A rumor of other worlds



In many ways, the best way to begin approaching the subject of this book is to glance at the flying saucer silhouette in the upper part of this page. If you're like most people in the world today, you recognized it at a glance as an image of an unidentified flying object, or UFO. During the second half of the twentieth century, this image leapt from obscurity to become one of the most widely recognized visual icons in modern culture. As instantly recognizable and freighted with meanings as the swastika or the Christian cross, it carries an additional load of mystery and controversy. Some people have questioned whether Jesus of Nazareth was ever a living human being, but nobody doubts the existence of the Christian church, and Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party made their appalling reality all too evident within living memory.

UFOs are different. Around half of all people in the English-speaking world believe that they exist, according to a variety of recent polls, and about half insist that they do not exist. After almost three-quarters of a century of confusion and controversy, claims and counterclaims, hoaxes, delusions, and honest reports of strange things in the air, nobody has yet been able to build a case either way that will convince people not already committed to one belief or the other. Yet these mysterious

objects, whether or not they exist in any physical sense, have become a massive reality in the world of our collective imagination.

This reality surfaces in small ways as well as obvious ones. Go to the nearest large grocery store anywhere in the United States, for example, and you'll likely have a close encounter with at least one flying saucer. It might be the one hovering on the labels of UFO Brand sponges and scrubbing pads—"cleaning supplies that are out of this world"³—or those on a box of UFOs breakfast cereal, surrounding the smiling face of a green-skinned alien. Stop in the greeting card section and you'll likely be able to buy a humorous birthday card with a joke revolving around flying saucers or alien abduction. Glance over the toys, and you'll probably find a brightly colored flying saucer or two hanging among the dolls and toy cars. Go home and turn on the television, and if you can find an old science fiction movie, or an episode of any of dozens of old and new science fiction TV series, your chances of spotting flying saucers on the screen are pretty good.

Now it's true that the same sort of presence surrounds many other entities whose nonexistence is accepted by everybody. An image of Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, for example, is just as recognizable as that of a flying saucer, and at the right time of year it could be found even more easily in the same grocery store. Still, nobody claims to have seen Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, at least to any listener much past kindergarten age, while people—thousands of them—do claim to have seen UFOs.

Yet there's another side to the UFO phenomenon that sets it apart at least as forcefully. Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny are relics of folk beliefs centuries old, long since stripped of the meanings that once made them powerful symbols. Few people nowadays recall the shamanic traditions that clothed Santa in the colors of northern Europe's most widely used hallucinogenic mushroom,⁴ and equipped him accordingly with reindeer and a habit of nocturnal flights near the winter solstice. In the same way, the robust sexual symbolism of rabbits and roosters that once surrounded the spring equinox, and passed over to Easter with the coming of Christianity, has been watered down into the pastel cuteness of bunnies and chicks in modern Easter imagery.

Once again, though, UFOs are different. The fabric of meanings and beliefs that have grown up around them in the years since 1947, when the UFO phenomenon first exploded into public awareness, draws on issues that are still very much with us today. For many people today, whether or not they believe in the physical existence of flying saucers

from other worlds, UFOs have become a major resource in efforts to make sense of some of the biggest questions of our time—the future of industrial society, the relationship between citizens and their government, the nature of scientific evidence, and the origin and destiny of humanity, to name just a few. Beliefs about Santa Claus don't lead people to devote their lives to researching a mystery, accuse their government of conspiracy, question their entire understanding of the nature of reality, or commit mass suicide. Beliefs about UFOs do.

Table 1

The late J. Allen Hynek, one of America's most distinguished UFO researchers and the founder of CUFOS (Center for UFO Studies), devised the standard system for classifying UFO sightings; this was expanded in the late 1980s to provide a category for abductions. The expanded system is given below.

NL: Nocturnal light—a glowing object seen at night from more than 300 meters away

DD: Daylight disk—a UFO seen in the daytime from more than 300 meters away

CE-1: Close encounter of the first kind—a UFO seen from less than 300 meters away

CE-2: Close encounter of the second kind—a UFO that leaves physical traces

CE-3: Close encounter of the third kind—an encounter with UFO occupants

CE-4: Close encounter of the fourth kind—the abduction of a human by UFO occupants

All these complexities unfold from the simple if awkward fact that people all over the world have seen things in the sky that they cannot explain in terms acceptable to the modern scientific worldview. A glance at a typical sighting will highlight some of the issues involved, and start the process of unraveling the UFO enigma.

Anatomy of a sighting

The evening of Monday, January 6, 1969 was cool and clear in the small town of Leary, Georgia. By 7:15 PM, as a cluster of men in business suits gathered in front of the town swimming pool, a skyful of bright

stars blazed overhead, veiled here and there by a few scattered clouds. The men in suits paid little attention to the stars; members of the local Lions Club, which met in the pool building, they puffed on cigarettes and shook hands with the district governor of the club, who had driven down to Leary for his official visit that night. Then somebody pointed to a bright light hovering in the western sky—a light that appeared to be moving toward them.⁵

Bluish at first, the light turned red as it approached the startled club members. At its closest approach, it seemed to be perhaps a few hundred yards away, and appeared as large and bright as the moon. It stopped, moved a short distance away, came close again, and then flew off into the distance and vanished. “It was the darnedest thing I’ve ever seen,” the district governor commented some years later. “We watched it for ten minutes, but none of us could figure out what it was.”

The club members filed into the pool building a few minutes later, held their meeting, took in a speech by the district governor and went home for the night. Nothing else unusual happened. In the terminology of UFO investigators, it was one more classic close encounter of the first kind, like the hundreds of thousands that have been recorded since the beginning of the UFO controversy in 1947. The entire sighting would likely have been forgotten forever, except that the district governor visiting the club on that January evening was a peanut farmer and Georgia politician named Jimmy Carter, who was inaugurated president of the United States a little more than eight years after the night he watched a UFO in Georgia’s skies.

The publicity that surged around the sighting once Carter became a national figure guaranteed that an investigation would follow. More precisely, there were two investigations, one by a believer in the theory that UFOs are alien spacecraft from other planets, the other by a believer in the theory that UFOs are all hoaxes, hallucinations, or misperceptions of known objects. The first investigation was by Hayden Hewes of the International UFO Bureau, and consisted simply of sending Carter a form, which the president obligingly filled out and returned. Without further ado the light was identified as an extraterrestrial craft. Thereafter the Carter sighting routinely appeared in one set of UFO-related publications as a classic case of a close encounter with an alien spacecraft.

The second investigation was by Robert Scheaffer of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), one of the major UFO-debunking organizations at that time. Scheaffer

tracked down the date and time of the sighting, determined that the planet Venus had been more or less in the same region of the sky where the witnesses had seen the light, and announced that the case was closed—Carter had mistaken a planet for a UFO. Thereafter the Carter sighting routinely appeared in a different set of UFO-related publications as a classic case of simple misperception of a known and entirely natural object.

These two investigations and their results were just as typical as the sighting itself, and just as inconclusive. Both of them satisfied the expectations of the audiences for which they were written, and neither one did anything to quell the reasonable doubts of people outside those audiences. The claim that the light observed by Carter and his fellow Lions must have been an alien spacecraft, on the one hand, makes sense only if you already believe that unusual lights in the sky must, by definition, be starships from another world. Nothing in the light's appearance or behavior justifies that assumption. All the evidence actually shows is that the witnesses watched an odd light in the sky that none of them was able to identify.

At the same time, the claim that the light in the sky must have been the planet Venus is just as unsatisfactory. Most people have watched Venus rising before the sun or setting after it. Very few, at least without chemical help, have observed it change color from bluish to red, expand to the apparent size of a full moon, and maneuver back and forth through the sky. If the same ten witnesses testified that they saw a dump truck go rumbling down the street in front of them, Scheaffer would have a hard time convincing a jury that they actually saw a child's tricycle sitting in a yard at the end of the block. It's only reasonable to suggest that the same logic applies to objects seen in the sky.

As for Scheaffer's claim that since Venus was in the same general region of the sky, the light must have been Venus, this is a circular argument that assumes what it claims to prove. If something strange hovered in the sky that evening, Carter and the other witnesses could reasonably be excused for not noticing a planet off in the background. If the light actually was the planet Venus, on the other hand, some explanation has to be given for the hallucination that affected the members of the Leary Lions Club that night. The small business owners and middle class retirees who make up the bulk of Lions Club membership are arguably not the world's most hallucination-prone population. Insisting that this particular group must have hallucinated the light's changes in position

and size, simply because the Venus theory requires such a supposition, once again assumes what it claims to prove.

Both investigations, in other words, started from a preconceived agenda—one, the belief that all UFOs must be alien spacecraft; the other, the belief that all UFOs must be hoaxes, delusions, or misidentifications of known natural phenomena—and both investigations, in fine displays of circular reasoning, found exactly what they expected to find. Start with a different set of presuppositions and pursue them in the same way, and it would be just as possible to “prove” anything you like about the curious light that Carter and his fellow Lions saw in the Georgia sky. A few UFO researchers have found their own reasons to support various alternative theories, and a few—a very few—have tried to approach the phenomenon from a less doctrinaire standpoint. On the whole, though, our culture’s collective discussion about UFOs has been dominated by the same two theories that found their own preferred answers to the Carter sighting.

A war of hypotheses

What makes the role of these two theories about UFOs so fascinating is that for most people, in or out of the various communities concerned with UFOs, they aren’t theories at all. For decades now it’s been common to see the acronym UFO treated as though it means “extraterrestrial spaceship.” Terms such as “pro-UFO” or “UFO believer” are used for people who accept the claim that UFOs must be extraterrestrial spaceships, while terms such as “anti-UFO” or “UFO skeptic” are applied to those who insist that UFOs must be some combination of hoaxes, hallucinations, and misperceptions of perfectly ordinary objects.

It should be obvious that a very large number of factors could cause the members of the Leary Lions Club, or anyone else, to see something in the sky they cannot identify. It should be equally obvious that the phrase “unidentified flying object” should mean what it says—an object in the air that the observers cannot identify—and nothing more, and that any theory about what the object might be is something separate from the experience itself. The fact that neither of these things is obvious at all in today’s UFO debates is one of the most interesting and least discussed dimensions of the whole phenomenon. As Thomas Bullard has pointed out in a cogent article, the experiential dimension of UFOs—the unidentified lights and objects seen in the skies by hundreds of thousands of

people over the last six decades and more—has long since been pushed off center stage by the myths, stories, and assumptions that have made the UFO one of the most recognizable cultural icons on Earth.⁶

It's unlikely that one book can bring clarity to a tangle this dense, but the effort has to be made. In this book, therefore, terms like "UFO believer" and "UFO skeptic" will occur only in quotes. The theory that people who see UFOs have spotted alien spacecraft from distant planets will be called the *extraterrestrial hypothesis* or ETH, the term that has most often been used for it in the small minority of books that have explored other options. The theory that people who claim to see UFOs are reporting hoaxes, delusions, or misidentifications of ordinary phenomena will be called the *null hypothesis* or NH; this term has been used a few times in UFO-related publications, notably by NH believer Robert Scheaffer in his debunking volume *The UFO Verdict*. There are, as it happens, several other less publicized hypotheses about the origins and nature of UFOs, and they will also be discussed in this book.

The dominance of the extraterrestrial and null hypotheses in the UFO debate has resulted in remarkable distortions in the way UFO experiences are collected, interpreted, and used. Both sides collect evidence that supports their point of view as ammunition for the struggle against the other side, and devalue everything else. Thus it's common to find believers in the extraterrestrial hypothesis claiming that a "large and consistent body of UFO evidence ... almost shouts 'extraterrestrial technology,'" while believers in the null hypothesis insist that the evidence just as clearly shows that all reports of UFOs are the result of fraud, hallucination, or mistaken identifications of well-known natural phenomena.⁸ As a result, dimensions of the phenomenon that don't fit either set of presuppositions fall through the cracks.

This distorting effect has had a particularly potent influence on the way the history of the UFO phenomenon has been portrayed. David Jacobs's 1974 doctoral dissertation *The UFO Controversy in America*, for many years the only serious attempt at a historical study of the phenomenon, managed to leave out nearly all of the most influential figures of the early years of UFO studies—Charles Fort, Raymond Palmer, and Meade Layne, among others—whose roles in the controversy, as we will see, cast an uncomfortable light on the origins of the extraterrestrial hypothesis Jacobs's book supports.⁹ Equally drastic distortions of history can be found in books supporting the null hypothesis.

For this reason our investigation will start by tracing UFOs back through time. When did people first start seeing UFOs of the sort reported by modern witnesses, and what did they think about the things that they saw? The answers redefine the UFO phenomenon in unexpected ways.