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Belief in alien visits to Earth is spiraling out of control: Why that's so dangerous

by Tony Milligan, *The Conversation*



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The idea that aliens may have visited the Earth is becoming increasingly popular. Around a fifth of UK citizens [believe Earth has been visited by extraterrestrials](#), and an estimated 7% believe that they have seen a UFO.

The [figures are even higher](#) in the US—and rising. The number of people who believe UFO sightings offer likely proof of alien life [increased from 20% in 1996 to 34% in 2022](#). Some 24% of Americans say they've seen a UFO.

This belief is slightly paradoxical as we have zero evidence that aliens even exist. What's more, given the vast distances between star systems, it seems odd we'd only learn about them from a visit. Evidence for aliens is more likely to come from signals from faraway planets.

In a paper [accepted for publication in the *Proceedings of the International Astronomical Union*](#), I argue that the belief in alien visitors is no longer a quirk, but a widespread societal problem.

The belief is now rising to the extent that politicians, at least in the US, feel they have to respond. The disclosure of information about claimed Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena ([UAPs](#) rather than UFOs) from the Pentagon has got a lot of bi-partisan attention in the country.

Much of it plays upon familiar anti-elite tropes that both parties have been ready to use, such as the idea that the military and a secretive cabal of private commercial interests are keeping the deep truth about alien visitation hidden. That truth is believed to involve sightings, abductions and reverse-engineered alien technology.

Belief in a cover-up is even higher than belief in alien visitation. In 2019, a [Gallop poll](#) found that a staggering 68% of Americans believed that "the US government knows more about UFOs than it is telling."

This political trend has been decades in the making. Jimmy Carter [promised document disclosure](#) during his presidential campaign in 1976, several years after his own reported UFO sighting. Like so many other sightings, the simplest explanation is that he saw Venus. (That happens a lot.)

Hillary Clinton [also suggested she wanted to "open \[Pentagon\] files as much as I can"](#) during her [presidential campaign](#) against Donald Trump. As seen in the video below, Trump suggested he'd need to "think about" whether it was possible to declassify the so-called [Roswell documentation](#) (relating to the notorious claimed crash of a UFO and the recovery of alien bodies).

Former president Bill Clinton claimed [to have sent](#) his chief of staff, John Podesta, down to Area 51, a highly classified US Air Force facility, just in case any of the rumors about alien technology at the site were true. It is worth noting that Podesta is a long-time enthusiast for all things to do with UFOs.

The most prominent current advocate of document disclosure is the Democratic Senate leader [Chuck Schumer](#). His [stripped back 2023 UAP disclosure bill](#) for revealing some UAP records was co-sponsored by three Republican senators.

Pentagon disclosure [finally began](#) during the early stages of Joe Biden's term of office, but so far there has been nothing to see. Nothing looks like an encounter. Nothing looks close. Still, the background noise does not go away.

Problems for society

All this is ultimately encouraging [conspiracy theories](#), which could undermine trust in democratic institutions. There have been numerous calls to storm Area 51. And after the storming of the Capitol in 2021, this now looks like an increasingly dangerous possibility.

Too much background noise about UFOs and UAPs can also get in the way of legitimate scientific communication about the possibility of finding microbial extraterrestrial life. Astrobiology, the science dealing with such matters, has a far less effective publicity machine than UFOlogy.

[History](#), a YouTube channel part owned by Disney, regularly delivers shows about "ancient aliens." The show is now in its 20th season and the channel has 13.8 million subscribers. The NASA astrobiology channel has a hard won 20,000 subscribers. Actual science finds itself badly outnumbered by entertainment repackaged as factual.

Alien visitation narratives have also repeatedly tried to hijack and overwrite the history and mythology of indigenous people.

The first steps in this direction go back to Alexander Kazantsev's science fiction tale [Explosion: The Story of a Hypothesis](#) (1946). It presents the [1908 Tunguska meteorite impact](#) event as a Nagasaki-like explosion of an alien spacecraft engine. In Kazantsev's tale, a single giant black female survivor has been left stranded, equipped with special healing powers. This led to [her adoption](#) as a shaman [by the indigenous Evenki](#) people.

Nasa and the space science community do support efforts such as the [Native Skywatchers initiative](#) set up by the indigenous Ojibwe and Lakota communities to ensure the survival of storytelling about the stars. There is a real and extensive network of indigenous scholarship about these matters.

But UFOlogists promise a far higher profile for indigenous history in return for the mashing together of genuine indigenous stories about life arriving from the skies with fictional tales about UFOs, repackaged as suppressed history.

The modern alien visitation narrative has not, after all, emerged out of indigenous communities. Quite the opposite. It emerged in part as a way for conspiracy-minded thinkers in a Europe torn apart by racism to "explain" how complex urban civilizations in places like South America could have existed prior to European settlement.

Squeezed through [a new age filter](#) of 1960s counterculture, the narrative was flipped to value indigenous people [as having once possessed advanced technology](#). Once upon a time, according to this view, every indigenous civilization was Wakanda, a fictional country appearing in American comic books published by Marvel Comics.

If all of this stayed in its own box, as entertaining fiction, then matters would be fine. But it doesn't, and they aren't. Visitation narratives [tend to overwrite](#) indigenous storytelling about sky and ground.

This is a problem for everyone, not just indigenous peoples struggling to continue authentic traditions. It threatens our grasp of the past. When it comes to insight into our remote ancestors, the remnants of prehistoric storytelling are few and precious, such as within indigenous storytelling about the stars.

Take the tales of the Pleiades, which date back in standard forms to at least 50,000 years ago.

This may be why these tales in particular are heavily targeted by alien visitation enthusiasts, some of whom even claim to be "Pleiadeans." No surprises, Pleiadeans do not look like the Lakota or Ojibwe, but are strikingly blond, blue-eyed and Nordic.

It is increasingly clear that belief in alien visitation is no longer just fun speculation, but something that has real and damaging consequences.

Provided by [The Conversation](#)