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# Even if You Think Discussing Aliens Is Ridiculous, Just Hear Me Out

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Credit...Igor Trushkin/EyeEm, via Getty Images



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The most curious subplot in the news right now is the admission, at the most senior levels of the United States government, that the military services have collected visuals, data and testimonials recording flying objects they cannot explain; that they are investigating these phenomena seriously; and that they will, in the coming months, report at least some of their findings to the public. It feels, at times, like the beginning of a film where everyone is going about their lives, even as the earthshaking events unfurl on a silenced television in the background.

A [number of stories](#) in [The New York Times](#) over the past few years have confirmed the existence of a military program on “Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification” and revealed videos in which trained pilots marvel over unidentified craft apparently defying the limits of known technology.

On April 30, The New Yorker published a revelatory [article](#) by Gideon Lewis-Kraus tracking the rise of congressional, military and media interest in U.F.O.s. Harry Reid, the former Senate majority leader from Nevada, emerges as the key actor. In the middle of his decades-long career in government, he pushed to fund these investigations, and since retiring he’s [been relentless](#) in voicing his conviction that the military has information on U.F.O.s that the public deserves to know. He told Lewis-Kraus that he believed there was crash debris held by Lockheed Martin, but when he asked the Pentagon to see it, he was refused access. “I tried to get, as I recall, a classified approval by the Pentagon to have me go look at the stuff,” he said. “They would not approve that.”

Language inserted into the [2021 Intelligence Authorization Act](#) gave the government 180 days to gather and analyze the data it has collected, and to release a report on the findings. On Fox News, John Ratcliffe, the former director of national intelligence, was given the opportunity to play down the report, which began under his tenure, [and he declined](#). “When we talk about sightings,” he said, “we are talking about objects that have been seen by Navy or Air Force pilots, or have been picked up by satellite imagery, that frankly engage in actions that are difficult to explain, movements that are hard to replicate, that we don’t have the technology for, or traveling at speeds that exceed the sound barrier without a sonic boom.” Nor are these just eyewitness accounts, made by fallible human observers. “Usually, we have multiple sensors that are picking up these things,” he said.

Perhaps Ratcliffe, a former member of Congress whose sole stint in intelligence came at the tail end of the Trump administration, is simply hyping his work. But that doesn’t explain why a former C.I.A. director, John Brennan, said in an [interview](#) with the economist Tyler Cowen that “some of the phenomena we’re going to be seeing continues to be unexplained and might, in fact, be some type of phenomenon that is the result of something that we don’t yet understand and that could involve some type of activity that some might say constitutes a different form of life.” Well then.

To state the obvious: All this is a little weird. None of it is proof of extraterrestrial visitation, of course. And I am not just offering a pro forma disclaimer to cover my firm belief in aliens. I really don’t know what’s behind these videos and reports, and I relish that. In this case, that is my bias: I enjoy the spaciousness of mystery. Evidence that there is intelligent extraterrestrial life, and it has been here, would upend how humanity understands itself and our place in the cosmos. Even if you think all discussion of aliens is ridiculous, it’s fun to let the mind roam over the implications.

The way I’ve framed the thought experiment in recent conversations is this: Imagine, tomorrow, an alien craft crashed down in Oregon. There are no life-forms in it. It’s effectively a drone. But it’s undeniably extraterrestrial in origin. So we are faced with the knowledge that we’re not alone, that we are perhaps being watched, and we have no way to make contact. How does that change human culture and society?

One immediate effect, I suspect, would be a collapse in public trust. Decades of U.F.O. reports and conspiracies would take on a different cast. Governments would be seen as having withheld a profound truth from the public, whether or not they actually did. We already live in an age of conspiracy theories. Now the guardrails would truly shatter, because if U.F.O.s were real, despite decades of dismissals, who would remain trusted to say anything else was false? Certainly not the academics who’d laughed them off as nonsense, or the governments who would now be seen as liars.

“I’ve always resisted the conspiracy narrative around U.F.O.s,” Alexander Wendt, a professor of international security at Ohio State University who has written about U.F.O.s, told me. “I assume the governments have no clue what any of this is and they’re covering up their ignorance, if anything. That’s why you have all the secrecy, but people may think they were being lied to all along.”

The question, then, would be who could impose meaning on such an event. “Instead of a land grab, it would be a narrative grab,” Diana Pasulka, author of “American Cosmic: U.F.O.s, Religion, Technology,” told me. There would be enormous power — and money — in shaping the story humanity told itself. If we were to believe that the contact was threatening, military budgets would swell all over the world. A more pacific interpretation might orient humanity toward space travel or at least interstellar communication. Pasulka says she believes this narrative grab is happening even now, with the military establishment positioning itself as the arbiter of information over any U.F.O. events.

One lesson of the pandemic is that humanity’s desire for normalcy is an underrated force, and there is no single mistake as common to political analysis as the constant belief that this or that event will finally change everything. If so many can deny or downplay a disease that’s killed millions, dismissing some unusual debris would be trivial. “An awful lot of people would basically shrug and it’d be in the news for three days,” Adrian Tchaikovsky, the science fiction writer, told me. “You can’t just say, ‘Still no understanding of alien thing!’ every day. An awful lot of people would be very keen on continuing with their lives and routines no matter what.”

There is a thick literature on how evidence of alien life would shake the world’s religions, but I think Brother Guy Consolmagno, director of the Vatican Observatory, is quite likely right when he [suggests](#) that many people would simply say, “of course.” The materialist worldview that positions humanity as an island of intelligence in a potentially empty cosmos — my worldview, in other words — is the aberration. Most people believe, and have always believed, that we share both the Earth and the cosmos with other beings — gods, spirits, angels, ghosts, ancestors. The norm throughout human history has been a crowded universe where other intelligences are interested in our comings and goings, and even shape them. The whole of human civilization is testament to the fact that we can believe we are not alone and still obsess over earthly concerns.

This has even been true with aliens. The science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson reminded me that in the early 1900s it was widely but mistakenly believed that we had visual evidence of canals on Mars. “The scientific community seemed to have validated that finding, even though it was mainly Percival Lowell, but it’s hard to recapture now how general the assumption was,” he wrote in an email. “There being no chance of passage across space, it was assumed to be a philosophical point only, of interest but not world-changing for anyone.”

What might be more world-changing is the way nation-states fall to fighting over the debris, or even just the interpretation of the debris. There’s a long science fiction literature in which the prospect or reality of alien attack unites the human race — Alan Moore’s “Watchmen” and the movie “Independence Day,” to name a couple. But a more ambiguous contact might lead to more fractious results. “The scenario you outline would be politicized immediately on the international stage; the Russians and Chinese would never believe us and frankly large numbers of Americans would be much more likely to believe that Russia or China was behind it,” Anne-Marie Slaughter, the chief executive of New America and a former director of policy planning at the State Department, told me. And that’s to say nothing of the tensions over who actually owned, and thus could research and profit from, the technologies embedded in the debris.

Slaughter went on to make a point about the difficulty of uniting humanity that I'd been contemplating as well. "After all, we are facing the destruction of the planet as we know it and have inhabited it for millennia over a couple of decades, and that does not even unify Americans, much less people around the globe." If the real threat of climate change hasn't unified countries and focused our technological and political efforts behind a common purpose, why should the more uncertain threat of aliens?

And yet, I'd like to believe it could be different. Steven Dick, the former chief historian for NASA, has argued that indirect contact with aliens — a radio signal, for instance — would be more like past scientific revolutions than past civilizational collisions. The correct analogy, he suggests, would be the realization that we share our world with bacteria, or that the Earth orbits the sun, or that life is shaped by natural selection. These upheavals in our understanding of the universe we inhabit changed the course of human science and culture, and perhaps this would, too. "There are times in science when just knowing that a thing is possible motivates an effort to get there," Jacob Foster, a sociologist at U.C.L.A., told me. The knowledge that there were other space-faring societies might make us more desperate to join them or communicate with them.

There's a school of thought that says interplanetary ambitions are ridiculous when we have so many terrestrial crises. I disagree. I believe our unsolved problems reflect a lack of unifying goals more than a surfeit of them. America made it to the moon in the same decade it created Medicare and Medicaid and passed the Civil Rights Act, and I don't believe that to be coincidence.

A more cohesive understanding of ourselves as a species, and our planet as one ecosystem among others, might lead us to take more care with what we already have, and the sentient life we already know. The loveliest sentiment I came across while doing this (admittedly odd) reporting was from Agnes Callard, a philosopher at the University of Chicago. "You also asked how we should react," she said over email. "I guess my preferred reaction would be for the knowledge that someone was watching to inspire us to be the best examples of intelligent life that we could be."

I recognize this is a treacly place to end up: evidence of extraterrestrial life, or even surveillance, reminding us of what we should already know. But that doesn't make it less true. Callard's words brought to mind one of my favorite science fiction stories, "[The Great Silence](#)," by the writer Ted Chiang (whom I interviewed [here](#), in a conversation that explores this fable). In it, he imagines a parrot talking to the humans managing the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico, for more than 50 years the largest single dish radio telescope on earth. There we are, creating technological marvels to find life in the stars, while we heedlessly drive wild parrots, among so many others species, toward extinction here at home.

"We're a nonhuman species capable of communicating with them," the parrot muses. "Aren't we exactly what humans are looking for?"