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Pop Culture to Conspiracy: Star Trek and the Nimitz 'Tic Tac' Case in the Context of Congressional UAP Hearings

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LUKE M. HERRINGTON, AUG 14 2023

Near the end of 2017, *Politico* and *The New York Times* released a pair of reports on a United States government program allegedly responsible for investigating unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and other unidentified aerial phenomena (UAPs). In doing so, they reignited a public wildfire of passion, wonder, and, though some may disagree, misinformation surrounding all things UFO. The United States (U.S.) House of Representatives has twice since added kindling to the metaphorical blaze, by hosting open committee hearings probing the subjects of the UFO and secret government conspiracies to conceal the phenomenon from the American and global publics. Most recently, the Oversight Committee—holding the second inquiry into the topic in under two years—gave a platform to a trio of ostensibly credible, high-level whistleblowers to discuss their views about non-human life and non-terrestrial technology. Of course, the testimony provided at the 26 July hearing failed to produce anything novel. Instead, claims made under oath sounded quite like the ideas conspiracy theorists have long peddled to the UFO belief community. If nothing else, they were riddled with innuendo and hearsay, and as before, no substantive evidence was provided to support any of these recycled rumors. Still, with too few voices of reason questioning this attempt to uncritically securitize the UFO, the opportunity left the committee's three star witnesses—David Fravor, Ryan Graves, and David Grusch—with more than a whiff of congressional legitimacy. And if social media is any indicator, this was an entirely adequate accelerant to further inflame the public's post-2017 enthusiasm (Bender 2017; Cooper, Blumenthal, and Kean 2017b; Gollom 2023; "Hearing on Government Investigation of UFOs" 2022; "Hearing on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena" 2023; Whiteside 2023).

While some theorists of International Relations like Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall might be pleased with recent attempts to raise the UFO to the national security agenda in Washington, D.C., UFO skeptics have raised numerous questions about the credibility of the mainstream press due to its role in these efforts. Now that members of the House's Oversight and Intelligence Committees (and some of their other colleagues) have accepted the story with such eagerness, other observers are raising the alarm about Congress and the securitization of the UFO as well. For instance, Art Levine's critical reporting in the *Washington Spectator* invites readers to ask if either institution is any more capable of distinguishing fact from fiction. This is important because the uncritical securitization of folkloric beliefs has previously been associated with a number of foreign policy risks, including, for example, pseudoscience-inspired arms races. However, other significant questions should be raised about U.S. vulnerability to information warfare. Given the ways countries like China and Russia employ deception and gaslighting in both their foreign and domestic policy toolkits, and given the way the West has been so beleaguered by misinformation of late, it is necessary for analysts to determine the extent to which policymakers and members of the public writ large have lost their ability to distinguish reality from fiction. Doing so may lead to a greater understanding of just how to inoculate the public from the threats posed by conspiracy theory and information warfare in the future (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; "Hearing on Government Investigation" 2022; "Hearing on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena" 2023; Herrington 2023; Levine 2023; Parker 2017; Scheaffer 2019; Vilmer and Charon 2020; Wendt and Duvall 2008).

To begin, it is necessary to trace recent events to their unlikely origins. Remarkably, while the Oversight Committee's

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recent foray into the politics of UFO belief can first be traced back to the so-called “Nimitz incident” in 2004, the Nimitz incident can itself be traced back to the annals of science fiction. That is, the legislature and media have been making much ado about a story that Fravor apparently cribbed, even if unintentionally, straight from the “Final Frontier.” In 2004, the television series, *Star Trek: Enterprise* depicted a series of events that clearly prefigure his alleged UFO encounter over the Pacific. So, how did the ideas of such an obvious work of science fiction migrate into American national security discourse and policy? As explained below, it all started some two decades ago in the weeks and months before the “Nimitz incident,” but a clearer answer most likely lies in the two decades since, in the flawed cognitive process of memory formation.

David Fravor and the “Nimitz Incident”

Counted among the Oversight Committee’s sworn witnesses, as already noted, were a group of three men. Aside from Fravor, this included Ryan Graves and David Grusch. Graves, a former naval aviator like Fravor, was invited to submit his testimony on UFOs and other UAPs due to his fighter squadron’s near-miss involving a probable cluster of radar reflector balloons over the Atlantic. Although unknown at the time, these objects were later identified by analysts at *The War Zone* thanks to their public patent records. These balloons (and similar clutter) obviously represent a hazard to military and commercial air traffic. While a radar reflector may not be as extraordinary as an extraterrestrial spacecraft, in this respect, Congress is right to question what the U.S. military is doing to enhance the safety of its pilots (“Hearing on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena” 2023; Herrington 2023; Rogoway 2019).

Grusch, a retired intelligence analyst, never once had any such encounter. This is strange because his reports about government efforts to cover-up the “truth” about UFOs and the material he euphemistically described as “non-human” helped turn him into the breakout star of the committee hearing. Yet, his assertions were based on indirect, unverified accounts he only heard from one third party or another. Stranger still is the apparent contradiction his claims of government overreach represent for the more tempered assertions put forward by Fravor and Graves regarding air traffic safety as they sat next to him. Where the latter men argue that their fellow pilots are not taken seriously by the military, and that the government is not doing enough to understand the issues posed by UAPs, Grusch wants the public and policymakers alike to buy into the mutually exclusive idea that elements of the government have been doing far too much without the proper congressional authorization or oversight for close to a century (“Hearing on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena” 2023).

Nevertheless, Graves’ and Grusch’s respective—if paradoxical—testimonies largely distract from the Nimitz incident, which was the event that ultimately set the stage for their appearance before the Oversight Committee. That’s where Fravor enters the narrative. His sighting of a Tic Tac-shaped UFO has been featured extensively in the mainstream media since December 2017. Press coverage of the former pilot’s claims has dwarfed the exposure such stories normally receive from even sympathetic fora like the History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens*, actually leading some of his fellow believers to dismiss him as attention hungry. Nevertheless, since late-2017, details about Fravor’s alleged UFO encounter over the Pacific on 14 November 2004 have been repeated *ad nauseum* in such venues as *The New York Times*, as well as on CNN, Fox News, *Good Morning America*, and *60 Minutes* (“Alien Evidence” 2019; Burns, et al. 2019; Carlson 2020; Cooper, Kean, and Blumenthal 2017a; Sciutto 2017; *Unidentified* 2019; Watt 2017; Whitaker 2021).

Accordingly, many are already aware that the Nimitz incident allegedly involved a UFO encounter between a group of Navy fighter pilots from the Black Aces squadron and some of their shipboard colleagues. To recap for everyone else, the Black Aces—Fravor included—were stationed aboard the U.S.S. Nimitz and carrying out training exercises off the coast of California ahead of their deployment to the Persian Gulf. However, two of their planes, a pair of F/A 18 Super Hornets, were detoured from their training mission to investigate a UFO flagged by radar operators onboard the U.S.S. Princeton (“Alien Evidence” 2019; Burns, et al. 2019; Carlson 2020; Cooper, Kean, and Blumenthal 2017a; Sciutto 2017; *Unidentified* 2019; Watt 2017; Whitaker 2021).

Fravor, then the squadron’s commanding officer, and his wingman, Alex Dietrich, recall next spotting a spherocylindrical capsule-like object hovering just above a patch of whitewater. The two pilots, both stars of the 2008 PBS docuseries, *Carrier*, also remember circling the object momentarily before Fravor descended for a closer look.

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On his approach, the UFO Fravor describes as a white 40-foot-long “Tic Tac” rocketed high into the air above him as if to evade his unwelcome attention. It allegedly reappeared later, when it was recorded by a third pilot, but that was the last time either Fravor or Dietrich saw the mystery object (“Alien Evidence” 2019; Burns, et al. 2019; Carlson 2020; Chermayeff and Block 2008; Cooper, Kean, and Blumenthal 2017a; Sciutto 2017; *Unidentified* 2019; Watt 2017; Whitaker 2021). Or so this extraordinary sounding story has been told.

Something like these events may really have happened. Less well known than Fravor’s version of the story, however, is the fact that the alien technology hypothesis has been thoroughly debunked in all three phases of the Nimitz incident. Fravor’s testimony under oath notwithstanding, the same is true for the more realistic claim that these objects simply cannot be identified. First, the radar returns that triggered Fravor’s UFO encounter were likely the result of ice or the Taurid meteor shower. Second, his personal experience from the cockpit of his plane was likely the result of a classified technology test carried out by the U.S.S. Louisville. Third, the video of the alleged Tic Tac that was later recorded by a fellow pilot and leaked to the public in 2005 and again in 2017 evidently shows nothing more than a commercial airplane (Herrington 2023; Mason 2020; McMillan 2020).

Curiously though, no one has yet noticed the *Star Trek* origins behind Fravor’s fantastic interpretation of these events. This is probably because in being pointed to the part of the story that began with the Black Aces, no one has thought to turn to the small screen. Nevertheless, aspects of Fravor’s story seem to have been drawn directly from the fifth live-action incarnation of the franchise to be produced for television. More specifically, the former pilot’s memory of the Nimitz incident has, in all likelihood, been confused with plot details borrowed from a trilogy of *Star Trek: Enterprise* episodes that aired in primetime on the now-defunct UPN network just weeks before his alleged encounter.

The *Star Trek* Origins of the Tic Tac Intercept

Star Trek: Enterprise premiered in 2001 and began its final season in the weeks prior to the Nimitz incident. Aware of these facts, I set my sights on the third and fourth seasons of the show and what I found convinced me that Fravor’s memory of a near-miss with an object deployed by the Louisville over the Pacific has likely been deeply distorted by his memory of the Enterprise shuttle pod as it was depicted in the series.

Namely, at the end of an episode entitled “Zero Hour,” the Season 3 finale that first aired in May 2004 before repeating on 17 September 2004, part of the Enterprise crew descends from space toward San Francisco in one of their smooth, off-white, almost Tic Tac-shaped shuttlecraft. Totally unaware that they had been catapulted into an alternate timeline moments earlier, the crew aboard the shuttle is shocked when they are intercepted by a hostile group of World War II-era fighter jets. The obvious anachronism of the old planes aside, the brief scene thus bears an immediate and striking resemblance to the digital reenactments of the Nimitz incident illustrated for the various documentaries and media outlets pushing the story onto the public over the last six years or so. The view of San Francisco Bay from altitude is also astonishing, as the glow of sunlight on the surface of the water mimics the appearance of the whitewater described as churning far below the Tic Tac intercept (Beaty 2019; Kroeker 2004b; “Star Trek” 2023; “TV Listings” n.d.).

Another incarnation of the scene appeared a few months later, when Season 4 premiered with “Storm Front” on 8 October 2004. The opening scene of the episode depicts an aircraft carrier, not unlike the Nimitz, and several support ships down in the bay, as the shuttle pod is shown evading both the fighter jets and a barrage of anti-aircraft fire rising from the surface. The away team then escapes by skyrocketing above the planes and shooting back into orbit in a maneuver more than a little suggestive of the Tic Tac’s escape from the Black Aces just a month later. The dialogue from the two stories is also similar. The pilots of the Enterprise shuttle pod are heard exclaiming “What the hell?,” just as Fravor and Dietrich recall of their own exchange during the Tic Tac intercept (Fridman 2020; Kroeker 2004a; “Star Trek” 2023).

On 15 October 2004, the shuttle pod intercept was shown a fourth and final time before the Nimitz incident, which occurred less than a month later. It appeared without further elaboration in a recap of the previous two episodes in “Storm Front, Part II.” The latter episode depicts the Enterprise itself in a dogfight with several old fighter planes in

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the skies over New York City, but only the recap stands out as an obvious visual referent for the Nimitz incident (“Star Trek” 2023; Straiton 2004).

In short, although it only lasts a few seconds any of the three times it is shown, the scene clearly prefigures descriptions and depictions of the Nimitz incident in many ways. It was also shown on primetime television as many as four times in the six months immediately prior to the Nimitz incident, including three times in the 8 weeks before the Tic Tac intercept. Most importantly, according to archived news releases published by *Navy Newsstand*, ships from the Nimitz battlegroup were in port, either between trainings or for San Diego’s October 2004 Fleet Week celebration, for all three of the fall *Enterprise* airings that took place in the two month window before the Tic Tac intercept (Allen 2004; Crawley 2004; Owsley 2004).

Finally, not only does this mean Fravor had the opportunity to see at least one of the episodes, but he also identifies—at least in action if not explicitly in word—as a Trekkie. While attending a 2019 UFO parade, Fravor greeted parade-goers with the Vulcan salute. Then, on at least two other separate occasions, he gave a public interview in which he explicitly mentioned *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* as an analogy for his experience (Brownstein 2019; Fridman 2020; Watt 2017). Add this to the visual and narrative plot similarities, the fall television schedule, and the Nimitz’s presence in port, and it becomes more than plausible to assert that *Star Trek: Enterprise* represents the true origin of the Nimitz incident narrative.

The Trouble with Memory

Does that mean Fravor intentionally plagiarized the “Storm Front” plot as part of some poorly planned hoax or irresponsible prank? Perhaps, but given past research on UFO belief, it is just as plausible to assert that the real trouble is one of human memory. Fravor may genuinely believe his story. Yet, as American legal reform advocates and neuroscientists both caution, memory is pliable. Even conspiracy theorists know this. They concocted the concept of the “Mandela Effect,” a conspiracy theory influenced in part by *The Matrix*, that blames super collider research for triggering involuntary travel across the multiverse, to grapple with the fallibility of human efforts to remember the past (Bartlett 1932; Dwyer 2020; “In Focus” 2008; Lamoureux 2015; Loftus 1975; Loftus, Goan, and Pickerell 1996).

Rather than the multiverse, the real problem is that our minds constantly construct false and distorted memories. Memory is not a recording. It is constructed and revised over time, by the act of remembering, as well as through the power of suggestion, imagination, and processes of psychological association between both real and fictive experiences (Bartlett 1932; Dwyer 2020; “In Focus” 2008; Lamoureux 2015; Loftus 1975; Loftus, Goan, and Pickerell 1996).

Indeed, scholars who study the alien abduction and broader UFO belief communities have repeatedly demonstrated this very process. For example, memories of a real 1956 plane crash near Roswell, New Mexico may have inadvertently affected some individuals’ memories of the alleged 1947 crash of a flying saucer that is said to have occurred in the same vicinity. In any case, errors in human memory formation are primarily responsible for people’s ideas about such phenomena. While real stimuli can trigger real experiences, it is those cognitive distortions that erode the reliability of human memory formation and recall, especially over time. As a result, no one is immune to the fact that it can be incredibly difficult to judge the authenticity of our memories (Bartlett 1932; Clancy 2009; Dwyer 2020; Halperin 2020; Loftus 1975; Loftus, Goan, and Pickerell 1996; Sagan 1996; Scoles 2021).

The Pop-Culture-to-Conspiracy-Theory Pipeline

Popular culture, and the media generally, may be the primary culprits in this process of memory distortion. For scholars of International Relations familiar with Hollywood’s role in the propagation and exertion of American soft power, this may be unsurprising. Even so, this has also been demonstrated by research on a range of unrelated subjects from Ronald Reagan’s reelection in 1984 to the Columbine tragedy in 1999, on to the spread of misinformation around the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In short, repetitive media coverage of an event or idea can lead to the construction of misperceptions, inaccurate consensus narratives, and false memories among members of

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an audience. Then, regardless of its accuracy, the audience can reinforce that consensus by parroting what they hear or see in the media (Bekler, Faris, and Roberts 2018; Cullen 2009; Hershey 1992; Nye 2009; Watson 2006).

Likewise, a pipeline exists that funnels a deluge of unconventional ideas directly from television, movies, and the like, into conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and other unorthodox, epistemically unwarranted belief systems. For example, after the release of *Paranormal Activity 4*, paranormal investigators appropriated the X-Box's Kinect motion camera into their ghost-hunting toolkits. Meanwhile, superstition associated with Friday the 13th can trace its genesis not to the date's namesake film series, but to the 1907 novel by Thomas W. Lawson also titled *Friday the Thirteenth*. More recently, characters like the Terminator, Hal 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and Agent Smith from *The Matrix* franchise have been singled out for their potential contributions to Western fears of artificial intelligence, while anime and similar pop culture products have been credited for cultivating more positive views of such technology in the East Asian context (Barkun 2013; Biddle 2017; Brock and Cox 2017; Cox 2018; Vyse 2019).

Unsurprisingly, UFO belief has been similarly impacted by everything from classic science fiction literature like H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, on to golden age movies like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and beyond. Interestingly, some UFO conspiracy theorists themselves openly admit to drawing on popular culture for inspiration or even "evidence" of their claims. Among other things, some argue that films in the "First Contact" genre are produced by Hollywood to aid the government effort to educate the public about the existence of extraterrestrial life prior to disclosing the "truth" about UFOs (Barkun 2013; Merlan 2019; Roth 2005; Tumminia 2007).

Perhaps most famously though, a few years after Betty and Barney Hill were allegedly abducted from a New Hampshire highway in 1961, they turned to hypnotic regression to flesh out the details of their experience. In recounting their harrowing story to their psychiatrist, the Hills described a group of aliens with eyes that both spoke and wrapped around the sides of the creatures' heads. Exactly twelve days earlier, on 10 February 1964, the alien with wrap-around "eyes that spoke" made its debut in "Ballero Shield," an episode of the television series, *The Outer Limits*. Incidentally, the subsequent adaptation of the Hills' story in a TV movie, *The UFO Incident*, likely cemented their narrative as the blueprint for every alien abduction story that would follow their own (Clancy 2007; Halperin 2020; Kottmeyer 1994; Pasulka 2019; Roth 2005).

The face of the archetypical "Roswell Grey" is said to have displaced the more diverse and benevolent features common to UFO abduction and contact narratives from the late 1940s to the early-1980s only after Whitley Strieber's *Communion* was published in 1987. While the description of 1970s-era aliens as being childlike or gentle may have been deeply influenced by Stephen Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, fear of the Grey became dominant in the zeitgeist only after it was featured on the cover of *Communion*. And while there is no way to know for certain if the now famous image of the Grey is based on photographs of masks crafted by Neolithic Kosovars, as David Halperin suggests, Strieber is another member of the UFO belief community that openly acknowledges that his ideas were largely influenced by the B movies of his childhood (Halperin 2020; Pasulka 2019; Reece 2014).

Interestingly, the image of the flying saucer may itself have been conceived as a result of a misquoted simile. After a *United Press* newswire report indicated that Kenneth Arnold saw nine flying saucers in 1947, he countered that he actually saw several objects skipping on the air like saucers skipping across water. Nuanced analyses cast suspicion on Arnold's attempt to revise the historical record. However, there is little doubt that the pre-Arnold Shaver Mystery, a science fiction adventure story about journeys around such mythological places as Atlantis and Lemuria that was portrayed as real when published in *Amazing Stories* magazine, influenced beliefs about the flying saucer throughout the 1940s and 1950s. This means the genie had already escaped the proverbial bottle by the time Arnold's story first went out over the wires; the information environment was already ripe for the idea of the flying saucer to flourish in the public consciousness (Bullard 2016; Halperin 2020; Scoles 2021).

Of course, sightings of triangle-shaped UFOs came to rival the saucer after a few decades. The real-world stimuli responsible for creating this new UFO were almost certainly test flights and reconnaissance missions associated with the SR-71 and similar aircraft. However, according to David Clark, the former resident UFO expert at the British National Archives, the appearance of triangular UFOs was also directly correlated with the debut of the Star Destroyer in *Star Wars* in 1977 (*Central Intelligence Agency* 1992; Clark 2015; "The Triangle Mystery" 2019).

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Moreover, the idea of ancient aliens appears to have been imported into Erich von Daniken's so-called "Ancient Astronaut Theory" from Theosophy by way of the Lovecraftian elder gods of early 20th century science fiction and horror. The same may also be true for the theology of the Church of Scientology thanks to Lovecraft's apparent influence on L. Ron Hubbard (Colvalito 2004; 2011; *PopMatters* Staff 2010).

The *Star Trek* franchise itself has a legacy of directly feeding into the popular-culture-to-conspiracy-theory pipeline. In fact, Hollywood filmmakers occasionally playfully invert this trope. *Galaxy Quest* features a *Star Trek*-like television series that represents a reality-distorting export to the stars that creates misperceptions among an extraterrestrial audience incapable of understanding fiction. This leads the aliens in question to believe that the show presents a real depiction of human history. In real life, *Star Trek* has—like the Cthulu mythos before it, or even the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* franchises today—been implicated in the creation of multiple new religious movements, including, for example, Heaven's Gate. Independent of Fravor's Tic Tac intercept, some conspiracy theorists even point to *Star Trek* as the origin of rival ideas. For example, Christopher Loring Knowles, a comic book artist-turned-conspiracy blogger, provides compelling evidence that "Project Blue Beam," a conspiracy theory about NASA and the antichrist, is based almost entirely on an unused *Star Trek* movie script that Gene Roddenberry wrote before filming *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Barkun 2013; Burton 2020; Colvalito 2004; 2011; Knowles 2010; Pasulka 2019; *PopMatters* Staff 2010; Porter 2007; Zeller 2014).

Still other instances of this popular-culture-to-conspiracy-theory pipeline abound. In his historical survey of conspiracy theory, David Aaronovitch identifies *Capricorn 1* as the cinematic origin of the moon landing conspiracy theory, while he also identifies the Tom Clancy novel, *Teeth of the Tiger*, as the likely source of the "Kelly Affair," a British conspiracy theory about the death of David Kelly, a Ministry of Defence weapons inspector. Meanwhile, one of the most famous anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of the 20th and 21st centuries, the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was itself plagiarized from a novel, *Biarritz*, which was published more than 150 years ago by Hermann Goedsche under the nom de plume of Sir John Retcliffe. And this is to say nothing of the influence of Oliver Stone's *JFK* on the John F. Kennedy assassination conspiracy cottage industry or the impact of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* on misinformation about the Catholic Church (Aaronovitch 2010).

Concluding Thoughts

It almost goes without saying that we can reassess this argument if additional concrete evidence comes to light. Similarly, if we broaden our perspective to include such works of science fiction as *The X-Files*, *Stargate*, *Men in Black*, *Resident Alien*, or even *Green Lantern*, it might become more appropriate to speak of a pop-culture-to-conspiracy-theory feedback loop than of a pipeline per se. Regardless, critical inquiry into extant evidence reveals that a relationship exists through which the eccentric ideas of science fiction (and popular culture more broadly) can be funneled into conspiracy theory, pseudoscience, and other epistemically unwarranted belief systems. This is why the latter frequently come off as so bewilderingly unoriginal. Insofar as it leaches many of its ideas from pop culture and other media sources, the UFO myth is no exception. (Bullard 2016; Dean 1998; Herrington 2023; Reece 2015).

Although no one has previously recognized this in Fravor's case, the fact that several observers have pointed to the prominent role played by the entertainment industry in the propagation of his story could make this somewhat discernable. Yet, even if it does not, a look at *Star Trek: Enterprise* clearly reveals that elements of the Tic Tac intercept were all present in American popular culture in the weeks immediately before the Nimitz incident allegedly unfolded in the skies over the Pacific nearly two decades ago. Furthermore, the fact that such a relationship has been observed so frequently by scholars, skeptics, and yes, even some conspiracy theorists, especially where the UFO belief community is concerned, raises provocative questions about whether the media or Congress ever had any real business taking these stories at face value. Of course, Congress can and probably should address the potential hazard clutter in the sky represents for commercial and military air traffic, but it is difficult to imagine an alternative scenario where its recent embrace of the UFO could be seen as legitimate.

Perhaps the ideological polarization of American politics has gotten so bad that members of Congress have no other method to reign in Executive Branch war powers than to exploit the UFO myth? This seems highly unlikely, but since some members of the Oversight Committee used their hearing on UAPs to criticize Department of Defense spending

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on one hand, and the Biden Administration's handling of the Chinese spy balloon incident in February on the other, it is not entirely inconceivable. While some scholars of information warfare might acknowledge that some precedent exists for the U.S. government to instrumentalize UFO belief in this way, it would raise new questions about the ethics of intentionally deceiving the public if this truly were the case (Herrington 2023; McMillan 2020; Pilkington 2010; Reece 2015; Scheaffer 2019; Scoles 2021; Scott 2015; Zak 2018).

Members of the UFO belief community (e.g., Fravor) may not—and likely will not—themselves realize or admit to any of this. They may be true believers. This is because real world stimuli are often responsible for our lived experiences while flaws in human cognition leave us all susceptible to conflating our memories of those experiences with the content we digest from our favorite popular culture, as well as the things we see on the news. Even trained experts familiar with this process, including an astonishing number of psychologists, can become true believers when their minds conflate fact with fiction. In my own case, for example, I can describe one of my earliest memories as “real,” and yet still entirely false. I remember looking out over the Missouri River while being driven home from my grandmother's house late one night in the early-1990s. I was scared as I watched a barrage of anti-aircraft chaser fire—or was it lightening?—illuminate the Kansas City skyline in the distance. I suspect this memory was constructed from images broadcast over TV from the frontlines of the first Gulf War. The incongruity of anti-aircraft fire in the American Midwest renders my memory of this aerial phenomenon as demonstrably false. At the same time, however, I can picture the episode in my mind with such clarity that I could swear to the veracity of the experience. What does this teach us?

The fact that we can all fall prey to the same cognitive errors reveals a need for empathy to prevent our lurching too far to the alternate extreme by pathologizing these beliefs delusional. For instance, a publication like *The Intercept* would likely be wrong to imply that a figure like David Grusch is ‘crazy’ for his beliefs in one conspiracy theory or another by reporting on such people's experience with post-traumatic stress disorder—or any other mental illness for that matter. Innuendo aside, Grusch's comments regarding the alleged recovery of “non-human biologics” are not inconsistent with human space research on plants and animals, and that is to say nothing of the prominence of characters like Rocket Raccoon of *Guardians of the Galaxy* fame in the Marvel Cinematic Universe or the wider pantheon of Marvel comic books (Blumenthal 2022; “Hearing on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena” 2023; Klippenstein 2023; Lindner 1954; Sagan 1996).

At the same time, the fact that these cognitive errors can be so readily identified also teaches us that formal institutions like the U.S. House of Representatives need not go out of their way to place any special weight on the testimony provided by anyone that can be categorized as a “true believer.” After all, revisions to national security policy probably should not be premised on the misremembered plot details of *Star Trek: Enterprise* or any other work of fiction. The fact that these stories have been taken so seriously though remains troubling for at least two reasons. First, regardless of what we call the Nimitz incident or the Tic Tac intercept, or like episodes of UFO sightings, the fact that belief in a *Star Trek*-inspired UFO myth or conspiracy theory has spread so far among American policymakers so soon after QAnon's ideas penetrated the corridors of American legislative authority—both literally and figuratively—hints at an uncertain future for American domestic politics. The same may be true for international affairs, as well. Second, and perhaps more concerning given the threats posed by information warfare, the fact that events portrayed in science fiction could be so easily and uncritically confused for events that really transpired raises questions about our ability to understand and come to a consensus about the very nature of reality itself.

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