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I want to believe: how UFOs conquered the X-files

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Chapter six

I WANT TO BELIEVE: how UFOs conquered *The X-Files*

David Clarke

'Pilot' (S1: E01), the first episode of what would become one of the most successful TV series of the late twentieth century opens with a notice: 'The following story is inspired by actual documented accounts'. The episode opens with a night-time scene in which a young woman runs through a forest in Oregon as if pursued by an invisible force. She is engulfed in a beam of light amidst a swirling vortex of leaves. Later, when her body is discovered, police and FBI investigators link it to a series of other unexplained deaths of high school students. It transpires they are all victims of 'alien abduction', a phenomenon that was the subject of intense public and media interest in the United States during the 1990s. As the episode unfolds, elements of this and other contemporary UFO legends are name-checked: missing time, nasal implants, hybrid human-aliens, cover-ups and an alien autopsy.

The 'actual documented accounts' tagline is not used again after the Pilot episode. It is replaced by a series of slogans: 'Government Denies Knowledge', 'The Truth Is Out There' and 'Trust No One'. The slogans reflect the cultural impact of the UFO controversy upon the show's creator and co-director, Chris Carter (Kozinets 1997). From 1993 onwards, the television series became the conduit through which an international audience were introduced to the milieu of legends, rumours and personal experiences that have circulated within the UFO subculture, popularly known as 'UFOlogy', since 1947. Whilst such beliefs are remarkably varied, Jane Goldman has observed, echoing the quote from the character Deep Throat that opens this chapter: 'no matter which end of the spectrum a believer occupies, there is one common certainty: the Government is hiding something' (1995: 247).

The X-Files explored the more arcane aspects of the UFO phenomenon to an extent that had eluded earlier made-for television dramas and films from which Carter drew inspiration (Coleman 1995: 23-4). During the second season Carter told journalists the series followed 'a long line' of made-for-television horror anthologies that included *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64) and *The Outer Limits* (1963-65). The latter was more orientated to science fiction with plot twists and some episodes included alien abduction narratives. Another inspiration for the maverick character Fox Mulder was the 1972 made-for TV movie *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*. This followed the adventures of a wise-cracking journalist, Karl Kolchak, played by Darren McGavin, who investigated vampires, werewolves, and invisible aliens. The success of the film and a 1973 follow-up led to a twenty-one-episode series shown on ABC during 1974-75. Carter admits this 'scared me as a kid' and, with *The X-Files*, he 'wanted to do something as dark and mysterious as I remembered it to be' (Coleman 1995: 23).

Of the forty-nine episodes in the first two seasons (1993-96), fourteen (28 per cent) featured plots that were based around the UFO cover-up and alien abductions. The cover-up/conspiracy theme also frames the plot of the first of two movies based upon the series, *The X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998). Chris Carter successfully combined horror and conspiracy themes from 1970s television and 1950s science fiction movies to create *The X-Files* at a moment when popular belief in UFOs made the leap from fringe to mainstream. This chapter will examine the contemporary UFO legends that inspired several individual episodes as well as the story-arc from the first two seasons of the television series. These legends include the interlinked alien abduction and UFO conspiracy/crashed saucer myths that Hilary Evans defined as 'constituting a wonderfully rich and elaborate mythology unmatched in the world's folklore' (1997: 257). Myths have been defined by Rollo May as a means of making sense of a senseless world: 'narrative patterns that give significance to our existence' (1993: 15).

Background

The modern phenomenon of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) arrived on 24 June 1947 when a private pilot, Kenneth Arnold, saw a formation of nine batwing shaped objects flying in echelon formation at supersonic speed above the Cascade Mountains in Washington state, USA. A newspaper sub-editor coined the phrase 'flying saucers' and within days reports of similar mysterious objects in the sky were made across North America and in Europe and Australia (Evans and Stacy 1997). Early in July, the Roswell *Daily Record* reported the discovery by a rancher of some peculiar wreckage that consisted of silver foil and sticks in the New Mexico desert. An official US Army statement linked the wreckage with rumours about 'flying discs' and announced it had been taken to the nearby Roswell Army Air Base for examination. A follow-up statement said the debris was just a weather balloon and the media accepted this explanation (Berlitz with Moore 1980).

By August of that year an opinion poll published by the Gallup organization found that nine of out ten Americans had heard of 'flying saucers', the highest recognition level recorded in the organization's history at that time (Durant 1947: 231). A follow-up poll by Gallup in 1966 found 96% of those surveyed had 'heard or read' about UFOs and five percent, approximately five million people, said they had seen something in the sky they could not identify (Durant 1997: 234). In 1950 Captain Edward Ruppelt, who led the US Air Force project Blue Book, tasked with investigating reported sightings, coined the acronym UFO ('unidentified flying object') to replace flying saucer (Ruppelt 1956).

Belief in the existence of intelligent extra-terrestrials can be traced back to ancient history. Classical authors speculated about the existence of life on other worlds and medieval sources tell of phantom ships and other unexplained aerial phenomena. Carl Jung cited a news broadsheet from Nuremberg in 1561 that illustrates a mass sighting of celestial phenomena as one example of many similar stories from medieval Europe (1958: vi). However, popular

belief that mysterious disc-shaped flying objects were craft piloted by aliens who were involved in reconnoitring the Earth can be dated to the opening of the Cold War (Eghigian 2015). In *The X-Files* 1947 is specifically identified as the year in which the US government first uncovered evidence of an alien presence on Earth and began conspiring to conceal the truth from the public (Graham 1996: 58). Post-World War Two visions of flying saucers became a media fixation as the spectre of a nuclear war fuelled fear and anxiety. Coupled with a legacy of government secrecy from World War Two, UFOs presented themselves as 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma', to paraphrase Winston Churchill who instigated a top secret British government investigation of the UFO mystery whilst Prime Minister in 1952 (Clarke 2012: 65-6).

The fiftieth anniversary of the Arnold sighting in 1997 marked the high watermark of public fascination with the UFO mystery. A substantial increase in public awareness is evident both in quantitative data from opinion polls and the results of a content analysis of print media stories sampled from twenty-five US newspapers covering the years 1985-2014 (Eghigian 2015: 613). A *Time/CNN* poll of 1024 adults released prior to the anniversary found sixty-four per cent believed aliens had contacted Earth, fifty per cent believed aliens had abducted humans and thirty-seven per cent said aliens had contacted the US government ('Poll: U.S. hiding knowledge of aliens', 1997). A 1998 ICM poll in the UK, with a similar sample size, found twenty-nine per cent believed 'extraterrestrial life has already visited earth' and two per cent claimed they had a direct experience of extra-terrestrial life (Clarke 1998: 18).

Increased awareness of the phenomenon is also apparent in raw statistics supplied by the UK Ministry of Defence's UFO desk that collected reports submitted by members of the public from 1958-2009. These show a tripling in the numbers of UFO sightings reported during the 1990s, from 117 in 1995 to 609 in 1996, coincident with the transmission of the

first two seasons of *The X-Files* on BBC 2 (Clarke 2015: 127). In response to a 1996 public inquiry UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) desk officer Kerry Philpott wrote: 'I believe the marked increase in the number of "UFO" sightings made to the MoD is directly related to the amount of television and media attention this subject has been attracting over the last few years. Any television programme on the subject of "UFOs" generates a surge in reports of…sightings' (National Archives ref: DEFE 24/1982/1). Public fascination was not fuelled exclusively by the popularity of television series alone. It has to be interpreted in the wider context of what MoD described as 'the media obsession with UFOs' at that time. This included the publication of a series of new books to mark the fiftieth anniversary along with magazines, TV documentaries and newspaper stories that interlinked UFO and alien abduction content with the *X-Files* zeitgeist.

The summer of 1996 also saw the release of Roland Emmerich's blockbuster alien invasion movie *Independence Day* that featured giant flying saucers and references to both Roswell and Area 51. The movie adopted rumours about the top-secret US military/CIA facility near Groom Lake in Nevada, where prototype aircraft were test-flown during the Cold War. Belief that Area 51, popularly known as Dreamland, is a storage facility for wreckage of extra-terrestrial craft and their crews, both alive and dead, features prominently in contemporary UFO legends that pre-date *The X-Files* (Patton 1997).

The Area 51 UFO conspiracy legend originated in 1989 when Robert (Bob) Lazar was interviewed for TV at a studio in Las Vegas. He claimed to have worked on a highly-classified project involving the reverse-engineering of captured alien technology. Lazar maintained he worked on disc-shaped craft approximately thirty-five feet in diameter and fifteen feet high and saw creatures on base that he believed were extra-terrestrials. Lazar claimed to be a physicist and engineer, but no one has been able to verify his credentials. Many journalists and some UFOlogists suspect his story is either a hoax or was part of a

disinformation campaign by a US intelligence agency (Patton 1997: 214-15; Pilkington 2010; Scholes 2020).

Since the 1980s further leaks from shadowy former military and government whistleblowers who alleged Area 51 was the ultimate resting place for wreckage from the Roswell incident continued to reach the UFO community. *Independence Day* opens with a giant alien mothership sending smaller flying saucers to attack cities and disable Earth's defences. After a battle with a squadron of F-18 Hornet jets led by Captain Steve Hiller (Will Smith), an injured alien is captured and taken to Area 51. It is only at this point that the CIA admits to President Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman) that the facility houses the spacecraft that crashed at Roswell in 1947 along with three bodies from its alien crew. In 2013 the CIA admitted that Area 51 really did exist but was used as a base for the secret testing of black project aircraft such as the B2 Stealth bomber that was first used in combat in 1999 during the Kosovo War (Clarke 2012: 139-40).

The release of *Independence Day*, in the year the third season of *The X-Files* aired on US and UK television, increased public speculation that a government disclosure of 'the truth' about alien visitations was imminent. At the time, the official responsible for the UK Ministry of Defence's UFO desk revealed his staff were struggling to answer a steady stream of letters, emails and phone calls from members of the public 'seeking information about the existence of alien life forms, or seeking a detailed investigation/explanation for allegations of abductions by aliens, out of body experiences, animal mutilations, crop circles etc' (Clarke 2012: 165). As a direct result, the MoD installed a twenty-four-hour UFO hotline answerphone service and dedicated email address to cope with the increasing workload. This helpline continued to operate until 2009.

The UFO legend plotlines from *The X-Files* engaged with and drew directly upon first-hand accounts of personal experiences published by the news media and disseminated

via UFO internet discussion forums. In September 2019 the accumulation of rumours concerning the Nevada base led to direct action in the form of a Facebook event, Storm Area 51, also known as They Can't Stop All of Us, that began as a joke posted by a college student (https://dreamlandresort.com/).

For the first two decades of the UFO mystery disc, saucer-shaped spacecraft remained iconic in popular culture as depicted in science fiction movies such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and *Forbidden Planet* (1956). From the late 1970s a new type of UFO shape became more common in narratives reported to the media, civilian UFO research groups and, in the UK, the MoD's UFO desk. Huge, dark triangular or boomerang-shaped objects of the type depicted in the episode 'Deep Throat' (S1: E02) were reported hovering or cruising silently above roads and cities in the USA during the 1980s. Typically, observers would notice a pulsing coloured light at the apex of each corner, or a light in the centre of the object. A similar shaped imaginary spacecraft, the Imperial Star Destroyer, appeared on cinema screens in the opening sequence of George Lucas's space epic *Star Wars* (1977). This period also saw the US Air Force release the first images of the distinctive triangular, radar-absorbent profile of the F-117A Stealth fighter and the equally UFO-like B2 Spirit bomber. Artist's impressions of these aircraft had circulated for a decade before they received their first public display in 1990 and 1988 respectively.

Alien abductions

In addition to UFO shapes the series also reflected ideas and rumours concerning the appearance of extra-terrestrials. Earlier in the Cold War, films such as *Invaders from Mars* (1953) fed upon the paranoia generated by the UFO flaps and fears about Reds under the bed. These movies portrayed aliens as hostile, bug-eyed creatures bent on invading Earth. *Invaders from Mars* featured the Martian Mastermind, a green creature with a large head and small,

tentacled body whose mutant servants abducted people from a small American town. In 1969 the editor of the British magazine *Flying Saucer Review*, Charles Bowen, noted the bewildering 'multitude of shapes and forms' adopted by UFO occupants or UFOnauts (Clarke 2015: 212). Before that time, reports of close encounters included accounts of hairy bellicose dwarfs from South America and tall, angelic blond-haired Nordics of the type described by Polish-American émigré George Adamski in the 1953 best-seller *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (Leslie and Adamski 1953).

Between the publication of Adamski's book in 1953 and the Apollo moon landings (1969 to 1972) stories about the appearance and modus operandi of UFOnauts underwent a series of subtle changes. Creatures with large heads and small bodies, that feature in *The X-Files*, did not become established as the template for the UFOnauts that abducted people before the late 1970s. The turning point occurred with Betty and Barney Hill's account of their alleged alien abduction in 1961. The dramatic narrative of the couple from New Hampshire provided the template from which all subsequent alien abduction stories can trace their origin. Media coverage of the story followed the publication of John Fuller's book *The Interrupted Journey* (1966). Betty Hill was a white social worker and Barney, who was black, worked in a post office. One night in September 1961 they were returning from a holiday in Canada to their home in the USA via the White Mountains in New Hampshire, when Betty spotted a light in the sky and announced it was following their car. The UFO appeared to move closer and at one stage Barney, who was driving, stopped and examined it through binoculars. Inside he saw humanoid figures dressed in black 'Nazi-like' uniforms and caps. He recalled the distinctive dark eyes of one, who appeared to be the leader, fix him with a penetrating glare. Barney ran back to the car in panic shouting 'Oh my God, we're going to be captured!'

The Hills resumed their journey and soon they heard a series of beeping sounds. At that point their conscious memory ended. Their next recollection was of seeing a road sign that indicated they were 35 miles away. Two hours appeared to be missing from their journey. Soon afterwards Betty began to have nightmares and the couple sought help from a psychiatrist, Dr Benjamin Simon. In 1964 the couple began to attend hypnotherapy session at his surgery in Boston. Under hypnosis an elaborate story emerged in which their car was stopped at a road block by a group of small, grey humanoids and the Hills were taken on board a landed UFO. Once inside the couple were subjected to intrusive medical examinations followed by a conversation with the 'leader' of the alien crew. Barney was transfixed by the eyes of the short creatures who had 'odd shaped heads with a large cranium' and big, black wraparound eyes. Dr Simon doubted the couple had really met aliens but admitted that 'some aspects of the experience are unanswered and perhaps unanswerable' (Pflock & Brookesmith 2007: 145).

The 'missing time' element that was central to the Hill narrative became an important motif in the mythic aspect of UFOlogy that originated in the USA. From the 1970s onwards the UFO literature and mass media published many other accounts from individuals in the US and other parts of the Western world who claimed to have experienced 'missing time'. Some claimed to have conscious recollections of being taken against their will, often from their homes by unearthly creatures. In other cases victims were transferred to landed or hovering UFOs where they were subjected to intrusive sexual examinations before they were returned to Earth. In 1987 horror fiction author Whitley Strieber published an account of his own bizarre experiences with creatures he called 'the visitors' in a bestselling book, *Communion*, subtitled *A True Story* (1987). The cover featured a striking artist's impression of the face of one of the beings who Strieber claimed abducted him from his cabin in upstate New York.

By 1993, when *The X-Files* premiered on US television, UFOnauts had been rebranded as 'the greys' in pop culture. The distinctive grey creatures, with small bodies, large heads and huge, black almond-shaped eyes feature in the series and stared out from movie posters, advertising hoardings, magazine covers and T-shirts. Chris Carter has said that he became convinced his idea for *The X-Files* would be a commercial success when he met a psychology professor who told him about an independently-funded 1991 poll conducted by the Roper Organisation. This claimed to reveal how three percent of the US population, or one out of every fifty adult Americans, 'believes they have been abducted by aliens' (Kozinets 1997: 6). Carter said he 'realised there was a topicality to this theme of the unknown and *The X-Files* grew out of that fascination' (Coleman 1995: 23).

Fox Mulder's quest to discover what happened to his younger sister, who was abducted by aliens from the family home becomes an all-consuming obsession for the fictional character. The alien abduction phenomenon features heavily in season one, as Mulder experiences flashbacks to an evening in November 1973 when he, aged twelve, and Samantha, eight, argue about what they should watch on TV. Fox wants to see a news broadcast about President Nixon and the Watergate investigation, but his sibling keeps switching channels. As they squabble the room is bathed in unearthly light. In a scene reminiscent of the 'abduction' of Barry Guiler in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), Samantha is floated out of the window while Fox is immobilized.

The Samantha abduction story draws upon the 'Darkside' UFO conspiracy theory that claims a 'New World Order' has been actively conspiring with extra-terrestrials responsible for the abduction and cross-breeding of humans and aliens. One of the founding documents of the Darkside movement was published by John Lear on the ParaNet bulletin board in 1987. Lear claimed the first open communication between aliens and the US authorities happened at Holloman Air Force base in New Mexico in 1964. Subsequently the US government made a

deal with these aliens 'that in exchange for "technology"…they would provide us, we agreed to "ignore" the [alien] abductions'. This pact also involved 'genetic engineering experiments' that fed the alien abduction folklore. Lear claimed these involved 'the impregnation of human females and early termination of pregnancies to secure the crossbreed infant' (Clark 1998: 301).

The Roper poll that inspired Carter was funded by a group of UFOlogists led by a New York artist and author Budd Hopkins. At the time he was the leading actor in the North American abduction scene and his 1981 book, *Missing Time*, became a bestseller (Hopkins 1981). It laid down three basic tenets of the abduction syndrome. First, people taken by aliens often reported periods of missing time they could not account for rationally. Second, many had been repeatedly 'taken', like Mulder's sister Samantha, and their experiences often began in childhood. Many reported a feeling of paralysis and terror as they were floated out of bedrooms or cars into a waiting 'craft' where they were subjected to terrifying, intrusive physical examinations of the type described by Betty and Barney Hill under hypnotic regression. Often sperm or ova were removed by their alien captors. Third, many self-identifying abductees were left with physical evidence of these procedures in the form of scars on their skin or 'implants' placed inside their bodies by the aliens.

The Roper poll was based upon a questionnaire survey of 6,000 people randomly selected. It included a number of 'indicator' questions. These asked the respondent if they had sighted a UFO, experienced missing time or felt paralysis upon waking from sleep. Two per cent of those who participated ticked a significant number of these indicators. The results led Hopkins to claim there was 'a very strong possibility' that around 3.7 million Americans had been 'taken' by extra-terrestrials. This interpretation of the results was challenged by sceptics who pointed out that 'a poll is only as trustworthy as those who phrase its questions'. Reviewing the survey for the London-based Society for Psychical Research, Hilary Evans

said the authors had measured the scale of the phenomenon but had failed to establish that 'those who claim to have been abducted have in fact been abducted' or that 'this constellation of experiences is exclusive to those who have been abducted' (Evans 1994: 379).

The cosmic Watergate

The X-Files has been described as television's *fin de siècle* compendium of conspiracy theories (Graham 1996: 56). The seeds of what UFOlogist Stanton Friedman called 'the Cosmic Watergate' were planted four decades before Chris Carter's scripts became a cultural phenomenon (Radford 2010: 1). Retired US marine and pulp-fiction author Donald Keyhoe was the first to lay the charge of cover-up against the US Air Force and CIA. His writings claimed a secret war was being waged between the US military and extra-terrestrials that overlapped with the Cold War. He also seeded the idea that aliens were first attracted to Earth as a result of our experiments with nuclear power and the destruction of Japanese cities in 1945 (Keyhoe 1950, 1957). This tapped into latent anxieties about nuclear confrontation that appear in movie plots such as *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951). Cover-ups and alleged interest by the UFO pilots in our atomic weapons and power plants have proved to be persistent themes in the UFO mythology.

Keyhoe's books were widely read during his lifetime, but his beliefs had relatively few adherents outside the members of the UFO believer community. In the USA during the 1960s the label 'conspiracy nut' was in some respects worse than being called a communist (Graham 1996). Watergate, Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers, and a series of political assassinations (discussed further in chapter eight of this volume) transformed that identification and by the 1970s conspiracy thinking was no longer confined to eccentrics on the fringes of mainstream society. Deep Throat's warning to Mulder, to 'trust no one', as he

lay dying in the final episode of season one, became the political mantra of the decades that followed.

Michael Barkun has identified three categories of conspiracist thinking in ascending order of scale. The first is limited and involves the conspirators concentrating their efforts on a discrete objective (for example, the 9/11 attacks or the assassination of President John F Kennedy). Systematic conspiracies are more wide-ranging and involve a single evil organization that attempts to control a country, region, or the world. Conspiracies involving Jews, Masons, and the Catholic Church fall into this category. The third and most elaborate type are super-conspiracies that involve multiple plots linked together in complex hierarchies like a series of Russian dolls (Barkun 2003: 6). In control sits 'a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors' much like the fictional US-led cabal depicted in *The X-Files*. This organization resembles Majestic-12, abbreviated as MJ-12, a fictional secret committee of scientists, military leaders and government officials that features in UFO conspiracy narratives. This legend began in 1984 when a dossier stamped 'Top Secret/Majic' was posted to leaders of the UFO community in the US and UK. The dossier is dated 1950 and appeared to be the product of a committee formed in 1947 by an executive order from US President Harry S. Truman to facilitate the recovery and investigation of spacecraft that crashed in the USA. In 1994 an FBI investigation concluded the MJ-12 documents were 'bogus' but the authors have never been identified (Pilkington 2010: 215).

A key element in the Cosmic Watergate is the legend of the crashed saucer. The Roswell incident that followed Ken Arnold's seminal sighting is central to the events detailed in the MJ-12 dossier and is undoubtedly the most important narrative in UFO history. The story revolves around the discovery of wreckage from a flying saucer crash in the summer of 1947 and how the bodies of its small humanoid pilots were removed by the US military. Those who witnessed the operation were either sworn to secrecy or had their lives threatened.

A fake cover story, that claimed the 'flying disc' had been later identified as a weather balloon, was released to the media, effectively killing the story until it was resurrected in Berlitz and Moore's book *The Roswell Incident* (1980).

Even in 1947 elaborate narratives about crashed spacecraft were nothing new. During the nineteenth century American newspapers occasionally published invented reports of extra-terrestrial airships that were prone to crashing in remote places. These narratives often involved the discovery of Martian bodies and hieroglyphic writings. The basic motif re-surfaced post-World War Two in a novel, *The Flying Saucer*, that revolves around a group of influential scientists who, worried by the impending Third World War, concoct a method of uniting world leaders by faking a series of UFO crashes including one in New Mexico. Strange marks are found on the shell of one object that an expert from the British Museum compares to Egyptian hieroglyphs, a motif that reappears in the MJ-12 papers. The plot resolves when Cold War tensions are replaced by a co-operative league, a version of the New World order, for the defence of mankind against the Martian foe (Newman 1947).

In 1950 pulp-fiction author Frank Scully published another variant of this legend in his non-fiction book *Behind the Flying Saucer Mystery*. His information came from a mysterious scientist concerning three Venusian spacecraft that landed or crashed on a rocky plateau near Aztec in New Mexico. The crash site is cordoned off by the military who gain entry to one of the craft via a porthole. Inside they found sixteen 'little men' and papers covered in strange writings that resemble hieroglyphics. The motifs present in Victorian airship, Roswell, Aztec and MJ-12 stories all feature in the first season of *The X-Files*. The episode 'E.B.E' uses the acronym for 'Extra-terrestrial Biological Entities' that appears in the MJ-12 dossier 'as the standard form of reference for these creatures until such time as a more definitive designation can be agreed upon'.

In the decades that followed others came forward to claim they were present at the retrieval of the Roswell saucer and had personally handled material from the crash (Carey & Schmitt 2007). Some informants said they had even seen the cadavers of the alien pilots that were subject to autopsies and stored in secret air force hangars. Their appearance is consistent with the alien abductors: small with large heads and eyes. A former US Army intelligence officer, Colonel Philip Corso claimed to have not only seen the body of an alien retrieved from Roswell but, like Bob Lazar, to have been involved in the US military's attempt to back-engineer technology recovered from the craft (Corso 1997).

In the episode 'Deep Throat', Mulder and Scully discuss the mysterious disappearance of a test pilot during a UFO flap near a secret airbase in Idaho. The more sceptical Scully asks Mulder 'are you suggesting that the military are flying UFOs?' Mulder replies: 'No. Planes built using UFO technology'.

Conclusion

Philip Corso's book appeared in 1997, the fiftieth anniversary of the modern UFO mystery when *The X-Files* was at the height of its popularity. By this point the Roswell legend had eclipsed Kenneth Arnold's sighting as the most evidential UFO narrative to date. Its proponents pointed to hundreds of witnesses some of whom had impeccable military credentials. The story had become so prevalent in popular culture that folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand categorized Roswell and 'The Landed Martians' as a new type of modern legend that revolves around 'the suppression of some secret that would, if revealed, ruin the careers of prominent officials or cause panic among the population' (Brunvand 1984: 198).

Anthropologist Charles A. Ziegler summarizes the Roswell legend as 'a traditional folk motif clothed in a modern garb'. His analysis suggests the central legend can be summarized as 'a malevolent monster (the government) has sequestered an item essential to

humankind'. That treasure takes the form of transformative knowledge: *we are not alone in the universe*. The culture hero, or UFO investigator, outwits the monster and, by investigatory prowess 'releases the essential item (wisdom) for humankind' (Ziegler, in Saler, Ziegler and Moore 1997: 51). In *The X-Files*, Mulder plays this traditional hero, 'a federal agent with a cosmic consciousness with privileged access to paranormal phenomena' (Graham 1996: 57). The crashed saucer/UFO conspiracy has become as much a part of the American cultural imagination as the JFK assassination and has transformed the modern city of Roswell into a place of pilgrimage (Scholes 2020: 148-71). It has remained so popular and ubiquitous simply because it reflects the quantitative data provided by a series of opinion surveys in the US and UK. These have reported a substantial proportion of the public in the Western world believe extra-terrestrials have visited Earth and the US and other governments are engaged in an on-going cover-up to hide the evidence (Durant 1997: 237-8). The 1997 CNN/Time poll found that eighty per cent of Americans believed their government was hiding evidence of ET life and another survey found twenty per cent were convinced a UFO crashed at Roswell ('Poll: U.S. hiding knowledge of aliens',1997).

Born in 1957, Carter has described Watergate and the downfall of President Richard Nixon as 'the most formative event' of his 1970s youth. In creating the series he revisited the moment 'when America came face to face with the repressed demons of post-war politics, that moment when decisions were made to bury the monsters and "deny everything"' (Graham 1996: 56). Fox Mulder's informant Deep Throat, who warns him to 'trust no one', was a contemporary version of journalist Bob Woodward's Pentagon informant from the Watergate era. Carter has described himself as 'a non-religious person looking for a religious experience' whose scepticism is waiting to be challenged, much like the characters Mulder and Scully he created (Goldman 1995: 219).

Carter's characters and plot evolved from the legacy of Keyhoe's writings and four decades of myth-making that have transformed the UFO mystery into the most powerful contemporary myth of the late twentieth century. The UFO conspiracy narratives have spread beyond the confines of UFOlogy because they appeal to a wider audience of conspiracist thinking that emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Unlike the situation following the JFK assassination when the label 'conspiracy nut' was confined to a tiny group of political activists, by 2001, those who were prepared to question the veracity and motives of both governments and mainstream media could no longer be described as belonging to a 'fringe' movement.

The X-Files, as a cultural phenomenon, reinvigorated the existing UFO mythology and revived its rich history of literature, rumours and legends. It also provided a platform whereby the UFO experiencers, the UFOlogists and 'X-Philes' (as members of the show's fan clubs are known) could share narratives and beliefs as a part of a sympathetic community. Some X-Philes are on record as saying their belief in UFOs, and interest in conspiracy theories, pre-dated the arrival of the show. Panel members at one convention 'said their interest in *The X-Files* originated in the "serious way" in which it treated UFOs and government UFO conspiracy or cover-up theories' (Kozinets 1997: 6).

In addition to drawing upon the subject's mythology for its raw materials *The X-Files* also fed back into the individual and collective experience of the UFO phenomenon. Drawing upon my own contemporary experience as a journalist and author writing for Fortean and UFO-related media at time, it was clear the phrase 'X-Files' had become synonymous with UFOs, secret government investigations and related conspiracy theories in popular culture. The UK Ministry of Defence UFO files, released at The National Archives from 2008-13 as part of an open government project that I curated, were routinely referred to, by both the print and broadcast media, as 'Britain's X-Files' or the 'Real X-Files'. As I concluded in the

introduction to the published guide to the collection: 'The overall theme of the series was summed up by an iconic poster in Mulder's office that featured an image of a "flying saucer" with the caption: "I want to believe"' (Clarke 2012: vii).

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