

Outline of Opening Remarks Prepared for Delivery at Purdue,
James Oberg // March 31, 1999

Subject: Are We Being visited -- a fascinating topic, whether it turns out to be true or not. If true, greatest event in human civilization; if not, merely the greatest popular delusion of the century.

CSETI's work -- which annoyed most of the established UFO organizations -- is one direction, and I have encouraged it to this extent: all stories should come out, regardless of fear of legal constraints. At OMNI magazine -- where I was the main UFO writer for the entire history of the magazine, from the very first issue in 1978 to the very last -- we did "Operation Open Book", promised to pay legal expenses, sought people with stories. We came to believe that the fear of punishment for disclosure was a mirage, that nobody has EVER been prosecuted or even persecuted for "spilling gummint secrets" about UFOs. And if the idea about the UFO coverup being a non-governmental group has any validity, the threat of federal legal sanctions becomes irrelevant.

There is an enormous body of folklore and claims on this subject, far beyond what can be discussed here. Ranging from millions of everyday perceptions by witnesses, to the polymorphic legend of Roswell, to current abductions, implants, and psychic contact -- overwhelming in its richness, breadth, and fundamentally human themes. Ubiquitous in time and space, throughout history, all around the world.

I've been fascinated from childhood -- read Keyhoe's books, tried to decode Adamski's letters from Venus, watched the skies. Saw my first UFO when I was 14: a brilliant rosy light in the post-sunset Western sky. Solved my first UFO case a few minutes later, when I called a friend in a neighboring town, asked them to take a compass reading on it, and triangulated its position and altitude, so when it faded out, I was able to calculate it was because of sunset at the altitude the object -- clearly a high-altitude balloon -- was hovering at.

My own specialization, spaceflight operations and history, particularly Russian aspects, has allowed me to probe farther on many famous cases. Whether it be claims that astronauts have encountered UFOs, or Russian stories, or actually sightings around the world that could be traced back to space activities, I've discovered that an inadvertant but crucial experiment has been accidentally set in motion: confront witnesses with a well-defined and startling visual apparition, and see what they perceive, and see what they later remember, and see how the story evolves in the folklore of our civilization. In particular, notice how the self-proclaimed UFO experts, the "serious scientists" devoted to unraveling the mysteries of the phenomenon, missed the boat, swallowed easily detectable errors, failed to follow up obvious leads, failed to exploit lucky breaks, jumped to and championed erroneous interpretations -- it's not a pretty picture, not at all.

These stories -- the ones I've "solved" -- were sparked by government activities in the US, in Russia, in China, and elsewhere, often activities which the governments didn't want to talk about, wanted to keep secret. Few cases were deliberate, it was a happy accident that the public was misled by the UFO camouflage (I do know of one case where the camouflage was deliberate). But it leads to a better understanding of the UFO phenomenon.

I've shown how Soviet space-to-ground warhead tests in the late 1960s were reported as a wave of crescent-shaped UFOs and endorsed by top ufo experts all over the world to this day (and the Academy of Sciences

endorsed the sightings as genuinely anomalous). I've seen sunlit fuel clouds from Russian and Japanese rocket stages cause wide-area panics in underlying regions, from South America to China to Australia -- with classic reports of car chases, radar confirmations, power failures, bizarre motion, telepathic contact, even in one Brazilian case, sex with the female pilot. One Russian rocket launching in 1984, seen from two Soviet airliners, has become known as the best-ever Russian UFO case, with visual, radar, and physical evidence (one pilot later died, allegedly from radiation exposure to a death beam from the saucer) -- except that the visual stimulus is unarguably identical to that of a rocket launching from a secret base in northwest Russia. In 1977, another launching -- the spy satellite Kosmos-955 -- created what Russian UFO experts consider the "smoking gun" of Russian ufos, a giant glowing jellyfish which dangled tentacles over cities, crashed computers, sprayed ozone, chased locomotives, drilled tiny holes in paving stones and windows.... and which one official Soviet spokesman even suggested might have been something like swamp gas.

And it's the basis for why I don't "believe" in UFOs, don't believe that the phenomenon MUST require an extraordinary, extraterrestrial, unknown-to-science stimuli. My experience has been that contemporary civilization is entirely capable of producing and misinterpreting more than enough visual apparitions, scrap metal, dreams, and tall tales to feed the folklore. Nothing more is needed.

Doesn't prove it ISN'T there -- they could be, and are more baffled than us about who it is we're seeing, since they've been cautious not to be visible. There's no A PRIORI reason why there couldn't be visitors, in the past or now.

In fact, that's another benefit of studying this topic: we sharpen our skills, refine our criteria to be applied NEXT time, prepare ourselves to search and recognize evidence of ETI. We stretch our minds and exercise our imaginations -- but the danger is always that some people may open their minds so far their brains fall out. I'll give examples.

How do we evaluate an event based on oral testimony? How do we assess the level of reliability of witness testimony? These are fundamental historiographical questions, and the sound techniques of professional historians and researchers might prove helpful to people now trying to reconstruct long-ago events through stories people tell.

And do people ever tell stories! Remember the famous picture of the sailor kissing the girl in Times Square on VJ Day? Would it surprise you that there are a DOZEN different men who each SWEARS he was the guy in the picture? And when a biographer researching LBJ's early life came to the incident where he sent a friend down the street to pick up the engagement ring for Lady Bird that he's forgotten at his office, he discovered FOUR different men who each SWORE they had been the guy running the errand -- down to precise details, to memories of their feelings and thoughts, everything.

Events don't even have to happen for people to remember taking part in them. My earliest research on Soviet space mysteries was in assessing -- and eventually rejecting -- the claims that many Russian space pilots had been killed on secret space missions back at the dawn of the Space Age. With better hindsight and full access to the records and personnel over there, that conclusion has been validated as strongly as any historical fact can be. Yet I have letters from military veterans, or from their families, full of sincere narratives of being involved with monitoring dying cosmonauts, of searching for their crashed capsules, of

seeing the reports and the hearing the tapes of events which we can be sure never happened.

Fortunately, narratives often contain 'tracers', clues to their validity, usually in the form of extraneous details which while insignificant to the teller may accidentally provide crucial validation of their memories. And similarly, narratives also contain 'trojan horses', known fictions which the teller has integrated into the story as it improves with age, expands with retelling, as the narrator moves from being a peripheral character to one more and more central to the action -- a very common effect recognized by experienced researchers.

When recreating the 1957 Urals "nuclear waste disaster" for my 1988 book, "Uncovering Soviet Disasters", I was confronted with a mass of documentation and transcripts, often confused, contradictory, and always incomplete. Yet once and awhile, something reliable showed up.

Yakov Menaker -- now in Israel -- had been a young man living near Chelyabinsk, had seen many post-disaster actions with his own eyes, had watched his mother and then his wife die of radiation poisoning -- or so he said. In one of his letters, describing how the animals and plants in the fenced off regions had changed, he mentioned in passing how the birch trees were still flourishing but all the pine trees nearby had died. He didn't know it, but studies at Oak Ridge confirmed that coniferous trees are more vulnerable to low-level persistent radiation than are deciduous trees. His throw-away observation was in fact powerful verification that he really had seen what he claimed to have seen -- and a decade later, newly released official Soviet-era reports backed him up even further.

Another example of what I call "narrative drift" comes in the stories told by astronaut Gordon Cooper, by all accounts a man of intelligence and integrity. He always has been willing to discuss the UFO incident that occurred while he was stationed at Edwards AFB in California, prior to becoming a Mercury astronaut. His first recorded narratives, to OMNI magazine in the late 1970s, described a white object photographed by a camera crew, which drifted by their tower. He was careful to say that he had only heard the story, that he was not a direct witness.

Ten years later, after many retellings, the object was said to have landed -- and Cooper now claimed that HE had been the officer in charge of the camera crew and had seen the films before sending them to Washington where they vanished.

By some lucky breaks, I was able to locate the cameramen, the officer who did the interviews for Project Blue Book, and the base historian, who confirmed that the landing of the object was a wide rumor at the time. But the films -- which are still in the Blue Book files and can be found by any investigator -- only show the object drifting slowly, right along with the wind, and leading directly away from the site where it had been inflated and released by a weather station a few minutes earlier. And the cameramen, still believing it was unexplainable, were astonished to hear from me that Gordon Cooper had even been on the base at the time -- they hadn't known it, and they were sure he hadn't been their boss.

In another story, Cooper describes encounters with fleets of airborne UFOs over Germany in 1951. I managed to contact more than a dozen of his colleagues at the base, and had friends comb the newspaper and UFO club files from Munich -- near the base. There was nothing -- no other memory or record of the event. But when an old NASA buddy told me of an earlier

version of the same story Cooper had been telling, where it had happened in the US, he mentioned the official AF explanation, which Cooper had scoffed at.

In an attempt to spark a reaction -- and more details -- from Cooper, in 1984 my editor at Columbia University Press sent him a draft chapter of my report. Cooper never answered, but long afterwards, there WAS a measurable response.

In my review manuscript I had substituted one 'explanation' for the actual detail I had been told, hoping that Cooper would be provoked to correct it. He never did -- and ten years later, when retelling the story in greater and greater detail, he mentioned on television that the Air Force had tried to tell him the UFOs were "seed pods", a laughable excuse in his opinion. It was indeed "laughable", because the phrase "seed pods" was the 'trojan horse' I had inserted in the manuscript sent to him for his review. It had not been meant to decieve him, it was an innocent attempt to elicit further details, which failed -- and which then succeeded in showing how somebody may later honestly and sincerely confabulate external details into a narrative.

We have any number of far more obvious confabulations -- narratives which have drifted far, far from the original perceptions, often incorporating outside themes and events -- in looking at claims about space activities and UFO secrets associated with them. There's a guy who claimed to have been let into the secret "zero gravity" room at NASA which had been built from UFO technology to allow people to float in the air -- a claim repeated credulously in leading UFO books all over the world. There's the guy who gave detailed accounts of his visits to the Lunar and Planetary Institute in Houston where he was able to sneak through a partially open door and see the archives of secret UFO photos, stored in the basement of the building next to the secret underground tunnels connecting it to other NASA facilities (when I later visited the site with the magazine editor who had published the stories, it was almost too painful to watch her face as we explored the building and found there was no basement, no secret tunnel).

Now, why would I be unwilling to believe the stories that Dr. Greer has presented from one of his star witnesses, Donna Hare? Again, without any reason to impugn her intelligence, sincerity, or integrity, let me explain why I find it impossible to believe her claims about secret UFO information covered up at NASA.

Ms. Hare worked at the NASA center in Houston for a number of years between the Apollo and the beginning of the Shuttle program. She has testified that:

1. She saw a space photograph with a UFO on it, and a technician was airbrushing it out prior to public release.
2. She was told (and clearly believed) that all space flights were followed by UFOs but astronauts were sworn to secrecy and threatened with grave punishments if they revealed it.
3. She was told (and clearly believed) that there were space photos showing a cattle mutilation in progress by a UFO, with cattle in the field standing with their tails straight up in alarm.
4. She was told (and clearly believed) that UFOs had been responsible for crippling the Apollo-13 spacecraft, so as to prevent it from reaching its intended landing area on the back side of the Moon -- but then, the UFOs had further interfered by aiding the doomed spaceship and making it possible for it to return safely to Earth.

I cannot believe the first item, the only one of the four to which she was a direct witness, because she described the photograph as showing trees and their shadows, which allowed her to determine the low altitude of the white circle she saw (and which she described as "a metallic disk") from its shadow on the ground. From what I know of NASA space photography, I believe it was impossible then or now for NASA to produce Earth surface images with sufficient detail to show a tree and its shadow. A vigorous search by several ufo buffs recently for such pictures in NASA's archives (the photo was described as being prepared for public sale) failed to locate any. Ms. Hare recently retorted that of course NASA had such pictures: "We not only had the technology to see a number on a golf ball back then, we used it in the Bay of Pigs -- remember? -- to see Cuban/Russian missiles aimed at our country." Aside from a confusion of the Bay of Pigs with the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the use at that time of U-2 spy planes, not satellites, the additional confusion of what super-secret military spy satellites could see and what NASA was interested in and had in its possession, gives me additional confidence that my disbelief in this story is logical.

Nor can I believe the claim about all astronauts seeing UFOs and being ordered to cover it up. Aside from my personal research into these bogus and confused stories -- see my home page for links -- there is the testimony of Apollo-14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell, a great supporter of Dr. Greer's efforts to dig into this mystery. Mitchell has said that these astronaut UFO stories are fiction, are untrue. Dr. Greer cannot expect us to believe both Ms. Hare's claims and Dr. Mitchell's utterly contrary assurances simultaneously. By the way, Apollo-13 wasn't headed for the back side of the Moon after all -- somebody with a good grounding in the reality of space flight would have known that and might have been embarrassed to repeat it.

Sticking to this topic, I want to get into two more claims from Dr. Greer which give me more reason for me not to believe that his material is reliable, trustworthy, and helpful. It deals with sightings by men on space missions.

CSETI's home page presents the story of cosmonaut Viktor Afanasyev, who describes a structured UFO pacing his space capsule. Here's why I find this claim impossible to believe.

The text claims that Afanasyev blasted off from Star City, Russia, in April 1979. Aside from misspelling the Salyut space station as "Solyut", there are worse problems. Nobody blasts off from Star City, it's the training base near Moscow, and there are no launch pads -- not a one. And in April 1979, Afanasyev wasn't even a cosmonaut -- he didn't fly into space until December 1990, more than a decade later. He never flew to the Salyut space station, he flew to Mir, three times (and is there now, by the way). Nobody else docked with Salyut or any other space station in April 1979 either. So whoever created this text knew NOTHING but gibberish about the Russian space program -- the same goes for the people who put this on their home page hoping you would believe it -- and it's a good bet that Afanasyev, who DOES know when he blasted off, from where, and what his destination was, had nothing to do with the creation of the story.

The other story I want to spend a great deal of time on involves the video from STS-48 which shows a zig-zag dot -- widely interpreted as evidence of UFO attacks and secret Star Wars technologies. NASA experts looked at the tape, at the request of a congressman who had been pinged by a ufo buff constituent, and they concluded it was a small piece of sunlit debris hit by exhaust from a steering thruster.

For the past five years, that case has surged to become one of the most famous -- and widely endorsed -- UFO events in history. Scientists have written technical studies, TV shows have highlighted it -- from the tabloid TV exposés to Larry King to even a major network, NBC -- and every new book has to spend several pages bragging about it.

I will show in a separate set of briefing charts why I believe the NASA explanation is correct and why the UFO versions are evidence for inadequate research, poor standards of analysis, faulty logic, and overall lack of adequate technical competence. If I can demonstrate this, it becomes one more reason -- and a powerful one -- for not trusting any similar claims from the same sources.

At the CSETI home page, the STS-48 event is described as "some kind of directed-energy beam attack". Various factual assertions are made, some merely based on lack of knowledge (the "attitude of the horizon does not change" -- misusing the technical term "attitude", along the way) and others on an apparent intent to promulgate misinformation ("All live feed from NASA shuttles was discontinued" -- a claim that clearly is untrue since on later flights even more videos of moving dots have been hailed as UFOS). Behind the blizzard of techno-gibberish, I've concluded there's nothing but bluff and bluster.

Now, let me try to prove this..... [see slides]

The mission of STS-48 had one other UFO-related event, a few hours after the zig-zag dots were videotaped. Radar tracking from the US Space Command in Colorado Springs indicated that there soon would be an uncomfortably close passage with a Russian satellite. A small "avoidance maneuver" was needed to give it wide enough berth, and the maneuvering rockets were briefly fired later in the afternoon. About a dozen or two such maneuvers have been needed over the entire hundred-flight history of the shuttle program -- it is not a common occurrence.

In a coincidence that no novelist would have dared ask his/her readers to believe, the threatening satellite was Kosmos-955. Its launching fourteen years earlier had sparked one of the greatest UFO perceptions in Russian history, and now it showed up -- entirely by chance -- on the day of the most spectacular space shuttle UFO in history.

We can only marvel at the Universe's random, meaningless coincidences. There's no need to seek deeper significances, or look for some non-existent causal tie. The only rational response is to raise one eyebrow, emotionlessly mutter "Fascinating", and realize that from time to time, life's just like that.