

Spielberg's Saucer Secrets

Written by Robbie Graham & Matthew Alford

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Steven Spielberg is obsessed with UFOs. Indeed, judging by the success of his alien movies to date, his obsession is infectious. Perhaps more so than any other filmmaker, Spielberg has moulded our perceptions of otherworldly visitors. Films such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982) abound with iconic imagery seared into the minds of millions: a mothership's miraculous ascension at Devil's Tower; a boy and his fugitive friend from the stars cycling in silhouette across the face of the moon. Even Spielberg's less memorable alien movies – *War of the Worlds* (2005) and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) – have enjoyed enormous success at the worldwide box-office, raking in some \$1.4 billion between them.

Although the 63 year old has donned his director's cap for just four alien-themed movies, his role as a producer has long seen him neck-deep in extraterrestrial entertainment. Spielberg's credits to date include, *Batteries Not Included* (1987), the *Men in Black* franchise (1997 -), the epic alien abduction mini-series *Taken* (2002) and the *Transformers* franchise (2007 -); he is also closely involved in the development of four projects due in 2011: the alien invasion series *Fallen Skies*; the 'Sci-fi-Western' *Cowboys and Aliens*; the much anticipated *Super 8*, the plot for which features Area 51, the US Air Force and an escaped alien entity; and the 'aliens in high school' thriller, *I Am Number Four*.

That Spielberg continues to make movies about life elsewhere is owed not simply to good business sense, but is due in large part to his own childhood fascination with UFOs; a fascination that would intensify into his late twenties and culminate in his cathartic production of *Close Encounters* – one of the director's most personal films. "I was mainly inspired when I began to meet people who had had experiences," Spielberg told Sight and Sound magazine in 1977. "I realised that just about every fifth person I talked to had looked up at the sky at some point in their lives and

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seen something that was not easy to explain. And then I began meeting people who had had close encounters... where undeniably something quite phenomenal was happening right before their eyes. It was this direct contact – the interviews – that got me interested in making the movie.”

[\[i\]](#)

Spielberg's interest in UFOs even extended to a belief in an official cover-up: “I wouldn't put it past this government that a cosmic Watergate has been underway for the last 25 years,” he remarked during a

Close Encounters

promotional interview, “Eventually they might want to tell us something about what they've discovered over the decades.”

[\[ii\]](#)

That the world's most successful living director has an overt fascination with UFOs has long fuelled conspiracy theories that he may have gained “inside knowledge” of a genuine “cosmic Watergate.” Spielberg, after all, is a generous campaign contributor to the Democratic Party and routinely rubs shoulders with the Washington power elite. [\[iii\]](#) Some even peg Spielberg as the government's go-to guy in what is thought to be a secret programme to acclimatise the public to the reality of extraterrestrials through entertainment media.

Spielberg has been inseparable from the political dimension of the UFO phenomenon since the early days of his career. In 1977, he spoke with relish of “rumours” that President Carter was due to make “some unsettling disclosures” about UFOs later that year. [\[iv\]](#) Needless to say, no such disclosures were forthcoming, although not for lack of effort on Carter's part. Jimmy Carter famously had reported his own UFO sighting in 1969 and it had made a believer of him

[\[v\]](#)

– so much so that one of his informal campaign pledges had been to reveal the truth about UFOs.

While at a Wisconsin press conference in 1976, a few months prior to his election victory, Carter was asked if, as President, he would, “air what's behind closed doors in regards to UFOs.”

“Yes,” replied Carter, “I would make these kinds of data available to the public... to help resolve the mystery about it.” [\[vi\]](#) Later that same year, however, when the now President-elect asked outgoing Director of Central Intelligence George Bush Sr. for, “the information that we have on UFOs and Extraterrestrial intelligence,” Bush denied Carter's request, stating that, “simple curiosity on the part of the President” was inadequate, as the information existed, “on a need to know basis only.”

[\[vii\]](#) At a public event in 2008, a journalist seized the opportunity to ask Carter about his apparent failure to follow through on UFO disclosure during his time in office. Carter replied sheepishly before making a hasty exit: “We did release a lot of the information, but I'm not sure how much was not released.”

[\[viii\]](#)

Intriguingly, the Carter Presidential Library contains no record of the film-loving President having ever viewed *Close Encounters* while in office. But in a 1977 Canadian TV interview conducted directly after the movie's official release, Spielberg said matter-of-factly that Carter had viewed the movie, "Last Saturday." "We haven't heard the direct feedback," said Spielberg, but added, "We hear he [Carter] liked it quite a bit." [\[ix\]](#) Indeed, the following

March, The Phoenix Gazette cited

Close Encounters

as, "Jimmy Carter's favorite movie," noting that, "The President has seen the movie many times."

[\[x\]](#)

This is not the only discrepancy over the official record concerning Carter and Spielberg. Officially, Spielberg never set foot in the Carter White House and had never met the President, yet a solitary photocopy of a photograph discovered in the Carter Presidential Library proves that the two men did indeed meet. The photo shows Carter and Spielberg in friendly conversation and is signed: "To Steven Spielberg, [from] Jimmy Carter." An accompanying White House stationary note signed by White House Social Secretary Gretchen Poston and addressed to Spielberg reads: "The President thought you would enjoy receiving the enclosed photograph."

[\[xi\]](#)

This apparent secrecy almost certainly resulted from a desire in the military-intelligence community – and even among Carter's staff – to keep the Administration publicly from being further associated with flying saucers. A UFO-spotting President viewing the ultimate UFO movie at the White House and having get-togethers with its alien-obsessed director would have been a PR nightmare. Not only that, but it would likely have exacerbated the White House's existing UFO-related problems.

Throughout the Spring and Summer of 1977 (before the release of *Close Encounters*), the Carter White House had been deluged with thousands of letters from the public pertaining to UFOs, the majority of which were handed off to the Air Force, which itself officially had washed its hands of the UFO problem in 1969. Exasperated, and ill-equipped to deal with the sheer mass of UFO letters, Carter's Science Advisor Dr. Frank Press sought to offload the problem onto NASA, suggesting to Administrator Dr. Robert Frosch that the space agency not only become the "focal point for the UFO question," but to pick up where the Air Force left off and spearhead a new government UFO investigations programme. This immediately set alarm bells ringing throughout the U.S. National Security apparatus and resulted in Colonel Charles Senn – Chief of Air Force Community Relations – advising NASA to steer well clear of the UFO issue. In a September 1

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1977 letter to NASA's Lt. General Duward Crow, Colonel Senn wrote: "I sincerely hope you are successful in preventing a reopening of UFO investigations."

[\[xii\]](#)

NASA, it turned out, needed little dissuading and was already engaged in attempts to dampen the public's enthusiasm for extraterrestrials.

Before *Close Encounters* had even entered into production, Spielberg's self-penned script had raised a red flag at NASA and prompted the space agency to send the director a 20 page letter in an attempt to dissuade him from making the film. "When they read the script they got very angry and felt that it was a film that would be dangerous," Spielberg told the film journal *Cinema Papers* in 1978, "I felt they mainly wrote the letter because *Jaws* convinced so many people around the world that there were sharks in toilets and bathtubs, not just in the oceans and rivers. They were afraid the same kind of epidemic would happen with UFOs."

[\[xiii\]](#)

Our requests to NASA, the Pentagon and Spielberg for a copy of this letter have proven unsuccessful. Spielberg's publicist Marvin Levy assured us on two occasions that he would pursue Spielberg on the matter, but has since become unresponsive. There is, of course, the possibility that the letter never even existed. Spielberg's biographer, Ray Morton, pointed out to us that, "Steven likes to exaggerate and has a tendency to tell tall tales... he has a great talent for bending mundane facts into something more interesting." [\[xiv\]](#) Still, the letter seemed real enough to Spielberg, who cited it as affirmation of his belief in alien life: "If NASA took the time to send me a 20 page letter, then I knew there must be something happening," he told *Cinema Papers*, "That's when I really found my faith."

[\[xv\]](#)

Spielberg's most successful alien film, *E.T.*, was also an Oval Office favourite. Incumbent this time was Ronald Reagan, who, like both Carter and Spielberg, was also known to be keenly interested in UFOs. During a private screening of *E.T.*

at the White House in 1982 in which Reagan and Spielberg were seated together, the President is reported to have leaned over to his guest and whispered: "You know, there aren't six people in this room who know how true this really is."

[\[xvi\]](#)

Spielberg related this story to Hollywood television producer Jamie Shandera shortly after the screening.

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Despite having had numerous opportunities over the years to refute the Reagan incident, Spielberg has yet to do so. In 1983, Emmy Award winning TV producer and journalist Linda Moulton Howe made multiple attempts to secure an interview with Spielberg to discuss Reagan's alleged comments but was told each time by the director's publicist that he was "away on location." [\[xvii\]](#) Presidential researcher Grant Cameron made a similar attempt in 1988 only to be told by Spielberg's publicity coordinator Kris Kelly: "Unfortunately, Mr. Spielberg is currently away working on his next project and is unable to personally answer your question."

[\[xviii\]](#)

On yet another occasion, Florida Today reporter Billy Cox also tried to crack Spielberg on the issue. This time, Spielberg's publicist, Marvin Levy, was more direct in his response, stating over the telephone: "Mr. Spielberg does not wish to discuss any private conversation held with the President."

[\[xix\]](#)

It is not hard to imagine Reagan having made the statement. Like President Carter, Reagan had also seen a UFO, not once but twice (whilst Governor of California), and his daughter, Patti Davis, had spoken of her father as being, "fascinated with stories about unidentified flying objects and the possibility of life on other worlds."

[\[xx\]](#)

Reagan's belief in aliens even affected the content of key policy speeches. In a September 1987 address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, the President said: "I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world..." He then paused, before posing a cryptic question: "And yet, I ask you, is not an alien force already among us?"

[\[xxi\]](#)

Most assumed he was speaking metaphorically, but a discussion two years previous at the Geneva summit conference between Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev raised the possibility that he may actually have meant it. Reagan had suggested that, in the event of an alien invasion, their two countries should fight back as one. Gorbachev himself acknowledged this discussion during a public speech at the Kremlin in 1987. "The US President said that if the Earth faced an invasion by extraterrestrials, the United States and the Soviet Union would join forces to repel such an invasion," Gorbachev said, before adding, somewhat wryly, "I shall not dispute the hypothesis, though I think it's early yet to worry about such an intrusion."

[\[xxii\]](#)

It's no secret that Spielberg has discussed the UFO topic with at least two Presidents besides Reagan – these most likely being Democrats Carter (for the reasons cited above) and Clinton (with whom the director was known to be chummy). According to Spielberg, the Commanders in Chief in question had no special access to the government's alleged UFO secrets. He even implied they had been deliberately kept out of the loop: "I know a couple of Presidents who certainly have not been 'clued in' – or at least they're telling me they haven't been clued in – as to the existence of any hard evidence that we've been gathering." [\[xxiii\]](#) This would seem to gel

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with the allegations about President Carter's failed attempts to access sensitive UFO information. Clinton, too, publicly has voiced his frustration at being stonewalled on the issue. At a speech in Belfast in 1995, Clinton made a point of bringing up the famous 'Roswell Incident' of 1947: "If the United States Air Force did recover alien bodies, they didn't tell me about it, either, and I want to know." [\[xx\]](#)

[\[iv\]](#)

He was even more direct in a question and answer session following a speech in Hong Kong in 2005. When asked about Roswell, the President replied: "I did attempt to find out if there were any secret government documents that revealed things. If there were, they were concealed from me too. And if there were, well I wouldn't be the first American President that underlings have lied to, or that career bureaucrats have waited out. But there may be some career person sitting around somewhere, hiding these dark secrets, even from elected presidents. But if so, they successfully eluded me."

[\[xxv\]](#)

As has been the case with many a Hollywood powerhouse before him, Spielberg's reach in Tinseltown soon came to extend to the corridors of power. Just how friendly the director had become with the political glitterati was illustrated in June of 1999 when his name appeared on a leaked list of attendees of the annual Bilderberg conference held that year in Portugal. Also on the guest list, among many others, were Bill Clinton, Kofi Annan, Tony Blair, Bill Gates, Henry Kissinger, Rupert Murdoch and Pope John Paul II. [\[xxvi\]](#) Those who receive the coveted Bilderberg invite do so because they are recognised by the world's most powerful movers and shakers as having tremendous influence on the international stage, as well as being willing to 'play ball' with the Global Elite. Being a Bilderberger is known to have its perks – in the months to follow, Spielberg would receive the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service from Secretary of Defense William Cohen,

[\[xxvii\]](#)

and, from President Clinton himself, the National Humanities medal.

[\[xxviii\]](#)

The director even received an honorary knighthood in a ceremony at the British Embassy in Washington. "The truth is," said a puffed-up Spielberg afterwards to a small crowd which included his good friend Hillary Clinton, "I stand before you now and I'm a knight."

[\[xxix\]](#)

"Sir" Steven may feign ignorance when it comes to inside knowledge of UFOs, but James Fox, the director of the 2009 UFO documentary *I Know What I Saw*, has a letter from Spielberg in which the Hollywood mogul allegedly makes some intriguing comments about its subject matter. Fox believes the letter to be important in the context of UFO secrecy and has requested Spielberg's permission to go public with it. Despite Spielberg's publicist initially suggesting that his boss would be, "happy to let that happen," the director's response was, "Not at this time." "There won't be a better time," retorted Fox, who continues to press Spielberg on the issue. As for clues as to what Spielberg may have said in the letter, Fox told reporter and radio host

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Angelia Joiner: "Let's suffice it to say, he's an advocate of government transparency on the phenomena." [\[xxx\]](#)

So, is it really possible that Spielberg has the inside track on UFOs? With such hearty back-slapping between him and his friends in D.C., it's not hard to see how such rumours got started. But a government programme to manipulate our perceptions of alien life? Strange though it may seem, the U.S. government has a long history of involving itself in UFO-related productions. In 1953 the CIA-sponsored Robertson Panel decided to, "strip [the] aura of mystery" from UFOs through the use of "mass media such as television [and] motion pictures." The initiative had a direct impact on several films and TV shows in the 1950s and '60s, as with a UFO-themed episode of the *Steve Canyon* TV series (1958-59) and the Walter Cronkite TV special *UFO: Friend, Foe or Fantasy?* (1966) – both of which were heavily edited in line with the panel's recommendations. In stark contrast, the government has, on occasion, actively promoted the notion of alien visitation. This was best demonstrated when

UFOs: Past Present and Future

(1974) – a Golden Globe nominated documentary supportive of the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis – received the full backing of the Air Force, Army, Navy, and even NASA.

[\[xxxii\]](#)

The U.S. government's motives for involving itself in UFO-themed entertainment are unclear, although it may be of some significance that in 1952, CIA Director Walter Bedell Smith discussed seriously, "the possible offensive or defensive utilization of these phenomena [UFOs] for psychological warfare purposes." [\[xxxiii\]](#) Others, meanwhile, prefer the theory that the government, by way of Hollywood, is conditioning us to the reality that we are not alone.

One final curiosity concerning Spielberg and UFOs is that, as of 2005, the director's public stance on the phenomenon has shifted abruptly from die-hard believer to Doubting Thomas. "I'm a little less sure in my 50s than I was in my 20s that we will be visited," Spielberg told the *Chicago Sun Times*. "Think of all the millions of video cameras out there now. But there are fewer photos of alleged UFOs today. But maybe it's a UFO cold spell. It's an off season." [\[xxxiiii\]](#)

Spielberg's rationale is puzzling, to say the least. UFO data collated by governments and civilian research groups over the past decade show a clear increase in the number of reported sightings worldwide with the UK Ministry of Defence even declaring 2009 officially to be the second biggest year on record for UFO sightings, having logged 643 reports. [\[xxxv\]](#) Sightings in the U.S. are also on the increase. In 2008, the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON) – America's largest UFO investigations organisation – logged upwards of 5000 sighting reports.

[\[xxxv\]](#)

Spielberg's comments about a lack of photographic evidence are similarly puzzling as barely a week now passes without local and regional news programmes across the globe featuring fresh photos and video footage of inexplicable things in the sky.

How, then, might we account for Spielberg's strange reversal in belief? Perhaps the director has now officially been let into the loop and thus been advised to adopt a more sceptical public position on UFOs, all the while continuing dutifully to manipulate public perception of aliens through his Hollywood productions. On the other hand, perhaps Spielberg is simply less clued in than he appears to be.

Frustratingly, as we approach our conclusion it seems we are left with more questions than answers – particularly regarding Spielberg's secret letters. What might the director have revealed recently in the letter held by James Fox and which Spielberg has now deemed inappropriate for public release? And why, 34 years after receiving it, does he continue to remain tight-lipped about the content of his mysterious 20 page letter from NASA?

In a career spanning four decades, Steven Spielberg has brought the extraordinary into the ordinary lives of everyday folk and, for the price of a cinema ticket, allowed us to glimpse the mysteries which flit at the peripheries of our humdrum reality. He has rightfully cultivated a reputation as the people's director. Perhaps, then, it's time he shared with the people just what – if anything – he really knows about one of the greatest mysteries of them all.

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The Guardian

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New Statesman

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Fortean Times

and

Filmfax

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Notes

[i] Richard Combs, "Primal Scream: An Interview with Steven Spielberg," *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1977, in: Lester D. Friedman and Brent Notbohm, *Steven Spielberg Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 31-32.

[ii] *Close Encounters* promotional interview, 1977, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9TY6yg4ejM&feature=related>

[iii] For a list of Spielberg's campaign contributions from 1999 – 2009, see: http://www.campaignmoney.com/biography/steven_spielberg.asp

[iv] *Close Encounters* promotional interview, 1977, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9TY6yg4ejM&feature=related>

[v] Carter's actual UFO sighting report is available at: <http://www.presidentialufo.com/jimmy-carter/238-president-jimmy-carters-actual-ufo-sighting-report>

[vi] Grant Cameron, "Jimmy Carter UFO," *The Presidents UFO Website*, August 1, 2009, available at: <http://www.presidentialufo.com/jimmy-carter/93-jimmy-carter-ufo>

[vii] This accounting of events was related by Marcia Smith, a space policy senior analyst at the Congressional Research Service in Washington D.C., to Daniel Sheehan, an attorney who had performed duties for President Carter and who worked on the famous cases of Karen Silkwood and Daniel Ellsberg. See: Richard M. Dolan, *UFOs and the National Security State: The Cover-up Exposed 1973-1991*

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(New York: Keyhole, 2009), pp. 132-133. Sheehan's video testimonies available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLxw--wondl>

and:

<http://video.google.co.uk/videoplay?docid=-6311954405187592633&ei=sieaS5hlh6f4BvhsZQN&q=daniel+sheehan&hl=en#>

[viii] Video available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrJeBCi47ME>

[ix] *Close Encounters* promotional interview, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BACQX-WzWeA>

[x] *Phoenix Gazette*, March 18th 1978.

[xi] Grant Cameron., "Jimmy Carter UFO," *The Presidents UFO Website*, August 1, 2009, available at: <http://www.presidentialufo.com/jimmy-carter/93-jimmy-carter-ufo>

[xii] Richard, M. Dolan, *UFOs and the National Security State: The Cover-up Exposed 1973-1991* (New York: Keyhole, 2009), pp. 138-142. A reprint of Senn's letter is available in: Timothy Good, *Beyond Top Secret: The Worldwide UFO Security Threat* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson), pp. 438-439.

[xiii] Gail Heathwood, "Steven Spielberg," *Cinema Papers*, April – June, 1978.

[xiv] Email to Matthew Alford, 6th November, 2008.

[xv] Heathwood, G., 'Steven Spielberg', *Cinema Papers*, April – June, 1978.

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[xvi] William L. Moore, "President Reagan on Aliens," *Focus Magazine*, November 1, 1987.

[xvii] Telephone conversation with Robbie Graham, February 24, 2010.

[xviii] Grant Cameron, "Reagan UFO Story," *The Presidents UFO Website*, August 1, 2009, available at: <http://www.presidentialufo.com/ronald-reagan/99-reagan-ufo-story>

[xix] Billy Cox, "UFOs won't be in the Platform, but...," *Florida Today*, August 17, 1988.

[xx] Grant Cameron, "Reagan UFO Story," *The Presidents UFO Website*, August 1, 2009, available at: <http://www.presidentialufo.com/ronald-reagan/99-reagan-ufo-story>

[xxi] Reagan's comments available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6Bz6Dkl84k>

[xxii] Timothy Good, *Beyond Top Secret: The Worldwide UFO Security Threat* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1996), p. 259.

[xxiii] Audio file available at: <http://www.adrive.com/public/b41c1e33b2d7d434a60147a98a0489cc46898eb43a2af6ea7ebb6c34b34f60c9.html>

[xxiv] Clinton's comments available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSMhNk8wSng>

[xxv] Clinton's comments available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3F3CXspsuo>

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[xxvii] *United States Department of Defense*, "Award Ceremony with Secretary Cohen and Steven Spielberg," August 11, 1999, available at: <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=396>

[xxviii] *National Endowment for the Humanities 1999 Annual Report*, "The National Humanities Medals," available at: <http://www.neh.gov/news/report99/medals.htm>

[xxix] *BBC News*, "Spielberg Receives Royal Honour," January 30, 2001, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1142446.stm>

[xxx] Angelia Joiner, "Spielberg Knows What he Saw in UFO Documentary," *Open Minds TV*, December 9, 2009, available at: <http://www.openminds.tv/spielberg-knows-what-he-saw-in-ufo-documentary/>

[xxxi] Robbie Graham and Matthew Alford, "Close Encounters with the Pentagon," *The Presidents UFO Website*, October 23, 2009, available at: <http://www.presidentialufo.com/disney-ufo-connection/267-close-encounters-with-the-pentagon>

[xxxii] Timothy Good, *Above Top Secret: The Worldwide UFO Cover-up* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), p.507.

[xxxiii] Cindy Pearlman, "Terrorism of the Future?; Film has Definite Parallels to 9/11," *Chicago Sun Times*, Sunday Showcase Section, P. 1, June 26, 2005.

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[xxxiv] Caroline Grant and Vince Soodin, "Brit UFO reports triple in 2009," *The Sun*, January 12, 2010, available at:

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2804537/Brit-UFO-reports-triple-in-2009.html>

[xxxv] Mutual UFO Network, "Press Release: Reports of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) Reached a Record Level in 2008," *PR.com*, March 19th, 2009, available at: <http://www.pr.com/press-release/139591>