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UFOs: Flying Emotions

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By [Seth Shostak](#)

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Carl Sagan at the Very Large Array in New Mexico. (Image credit: Cosmos/Discovery)

Readerwarning: I'm taking off the kid gloves. If I seem angry here — a state of emotional discombobulation that seldom seems to be

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my wont — it's because people whom I barely know, or in some cases haven't even heard of, insist on propelling me over the precipice.

Ostensibly, the issue is extraterrestrial intelligence. Not whether it exists, but whether the aliens have come to Earth. This idea, often monikered as "the UFO hypothesis," is a belief that's neither fringe nor uncommon. A 2002 Roper poll found that nearly half of all Americans believe that alien craft have visited Earth, and an even larger percentage feel in their heart of hearts that the government is playing dumb about these cosmic callers.

But that's not what's causing the bile to marinate my gallbladder. Personally (and as regular readers know), I'm not convinced by the evidence presented so far that aliens are sharing our airspace. But the evidence for the UFO hypothesis isn't the point here. Rather, it's the lack of civilized discourse.

For years, anytime I would write an article on these digital pages about the UFO question, I could be sure of quickly accumulating a dozen or so e-mails from offended readers. What struck me was that these respondents were less interested in trying to provide good evidence for landed aliens than they were in making brutal, *ad hominem* attacks on me. Somehow, the fact that I didn't share their convictions must mean that I'm an "evil, terrible person." This sort of automatic excoriation seemed to come with the territory. Talking about UFOs was like moonlighting as a metal duck in a shooting gallery.

But some recent appearances on CNN's "Larry King Live" made clear to me that sheet-steel quackers are an abundant breed. Anyone who publicly doubts that alien spacecraft are sailing our skies risks being a target. On the last of these programs, I watched as folks who were there to describe their evidence for extraterrestrial visitation laid into the guests who were skeptical: [Bill Nye \(the Science Guy\)](#) and me. Several of the UFO proponents made puerile jokes about Nye's TV career, much of which has been devoted to teaching science to kids (it's hard to think of a more worthwhile endeavor, incidentally). Nye's responses were impressively dignified, although that didn't seem to faze those who found endless amusement in berating him.

I, too, was attacked, generally along the lines that, since I don't investigate UFO reports, I'm not qualified to opine on whether I find them convincing or not. Well, that's bunk. And it's certainly not how science works. I don't need to be an astronomer specializing in black hole research, nor do I need to gauge whether someone's claim that they've found one of these collapsed objects in the center of some galaxy or other is credible. I can do that based on the methodology, the reported data, and (to be brutally frank) the reputation of the investigator and their professional affiliation. The burden of proof in science is on the person making the claim. And if the only way the investigator can convince others is by insisting that their audience shift careers and start doing *their* work, then something's gravely amiss. [Carl Sagan](#) was asked his opinion about many matters in which he had no research background. His thoughts on same were valuable and worth hearing.

Needless to say, there were a number of vituperative e-mails awaiting my delectation after the "King" shows (and, to be fair, some nice ones, too). One of the loveliest, from the executive director of an advocacy group that hopes to wrest loose UFO secrets supposedly held by the government, included these well-wishes:

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"While we don't expect you to go away anytime soon, there is one consolation. Everything you have said and written on the subject of UFO/ET phenomena is archived - audio, video, email, paper. You can be assured that when this issue is finally resolved, post Disclosure, every time you open that ill informed mouth of yours, that archive will be brought to bear and you will be eviscerated. You deserve nothing less."

Although I disagreed with this gentleman's conviction that a massive cover-up has kept alien visitation from our clear notice, I told him that I would not want him "to be eviscerated, now or in the future." His rejoinder was massively unfriendly and threatening.

So what's wrong here? Why is it that so many members of the UFO community feel that they need to be bullies? Yes, I'll freely admit that many scientists are dismissive of the UFO hypothesis — often to the point of ridicule. I can understand the frustration occasioned by that. "I don't get no respect" can be a legitimate plaint, and I'm sure that some UFO proponents feel that pain.

Nonetheless, if after 60 years of claims, the only way that those who believe we're hosting extraterrestrials can make their point is by wielding the blunt weapon of personal attack, then the whole issue has gone off the rails. I'm willing to listen, and — believe it or not — you could convince me with decent evidence. After all, I happen to think that extraterrestrial intelligence is a frequent occurrence in a universe of ten thousand million million million stars.

But when you resort to threats, vitriol and scorn, I think you've lost more than the argument. You've lost your cred.

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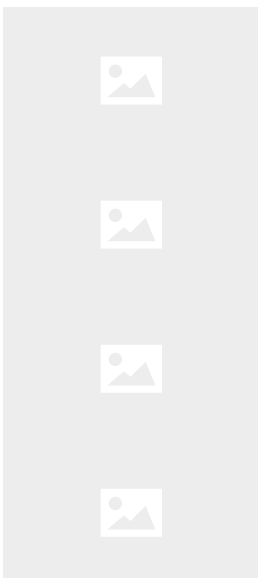
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