

FIRST WORD

A UFO FOUNDATION:
Working together to find answers

By Gregory Benford

UFO fans hate scientists, and vice versa. Or so it seems, reading their mutually acrimonious exchanges, in person and online alike. I get the definite impression of angry people shouting past each other to little effect.

There are good reasons for this, not the least of which is simple scientific skepticism. As a physicist, I'm sympathetic to the argument that nearly half a century after the first "flying saucer scare," we have no solid, physical, generally agreed upon evidence. Studies of ghosts have the same trouble. No data, no science.

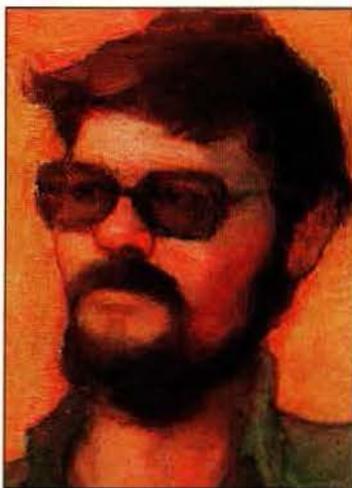
Personally, I think the extraterrestrial visitor explanation of the widespread reported sightings is quite unlikely—but not disproved or impossible, and there's the rub. In science, hypotheses must be checked and rechecked. Scientists speak of falsifying theories, not proving them, for no proof is ever final. A theory is only as good as its latest rub against reality.

The alien visitor theory of UFOs has not been falsified, but it has few advocates, perhaps none, among scientists—and they do no research into it. So the subject is mired in coverage via media such as *The X-Files* and the *National Enquirer*.

Instead of the high-decibel cat fight we now witness, how about some serious study?

If the alien visitor explanation holds water, then their frequent visits imply a base somewhere in our solar system. (I assume they don't have faster-than-light travel so convenient that zipping across the galaxy for dinner is fashionable.) Obviously, they're making it tough for scientists to get any physical proof of them. Why? We can't say—aliens are tricky.

But they can't brush away all their footprints, and a serious



UFO enthusiast should be willing to track them down. That's where the scientists come in.

To be taken seriously by scientists, I think UFO fans should support—obviously including funding—research which could uncover convincing evidence. UFOlogists would gain both credibility and, perhaps, some solid arguing points.

They should try thinking like scientists, too. Aliens might do anything, but they need a place to sleep, regroup, refuel. Where?

There are several likely spots where UFOs could conveniently base. Obviously, the moon—probably on the other side, to be secretive. Searching for them there implies a careful analysis of the high-resolution mapping data acquired in 1994 by the *Clementine* spacecraft. Such scrutiny is going on right now, but not with an agenda of searching for a UFO base. For quite small sums, a single data processor could cast a fresh eye at the data and report oddities. There are certain to be some.

Think further. There are convenient places to park a spaceship nearby. The lunar Lagrangian points are stable zones, leading

and trailing the moon in its orbit. A base left there would not drift from tidal tugs. Are there UFOs lurking there?

In the early 1980s two astronomers looked for shiny objects reflecting sunlight at the Lagrangian points and found nothing down to their resolving limit of a few meters. (See *Icarus*, Volume 55, page 453.) They did this without UFO ideas in mind. If the UFO community had supplied the few thousands of dollars their work cost, they would at least have gained some respect.

How about searching further afield? Throughout the 1980s Michael Papagiannis of Boston University argued in scientific journals that starfaring aliens might well use the asteroid belt as an easy residential zone and source of raw materials.

He proposed looking for them by tracking their waste heat; anything using energy eventually generates an infrared glow. Most asteroids are 200 degrees Celsius colder than freezing, so heat stands out. The proposal was technically sound. Still, Papagiannis could not get NASA or NSF funding.

Enter the UFOlogists. A foundation dedicated to real, objective research which bears upon UFOs could fund Papagiannis's infrared search, or other such ideas. The foundation would further true scientific research, be cited in publications, and build bridges to a vastly skeptical scientific community.

Odds are they'll find nothing, of course. That happens all the time to scientists. But the art of searching itself is noble, progressive, and might just surprise everyone. I urge the UFO community to consider reaching out in this way. A serious institution would be greeted by far more respect than is the shouting match going on now. ☐

Not only a respected physicist, Greg Benford is one of the leading science-fiction writers of his generation. His Galactic Center series is published by Bantam Books.