The Tin Foil Hat Brigade Strikes Again

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Editor's Note: I don't believe in conspiracy theories, UFOs, or little green men. For those who do, your tin foil hats will deflect my criticism.

In what's sure to encourage conspiracy nuts worldwide, Britain has released the government's complete file on the "Rendlesham Forest Incident [1]" of December 1980. The 191-page document [2] was released as part of a larger cache of British "UFO files [3]" covering the years 1981-1996. Lacking a concrete explanation, the government had nonetheless determined that the UFO spotted in Rendelsham posed no threat.

The fact that the incident occurred on and around a military base has sustained the conspiracy theories. The term "military cover-up" is as ubiquitous as the rising sun. The declassified document kicks off with a memo [4] from the Deputy Base Commander, U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Charles Halt. According to Halt's memo, USAF security police patrolmen reported seeing, "*unusual lights outside the back gate at RAF Woodbridge.*" The disputed object was "*metallic in appearance and triangular in shape, approximately two to three meters across the base and approximately two meters high.*" As the Airmen approached the object, it sped away and disappeared.

Holt's memo (to the UK's Ministry of Defence) was originally released in 1983 as part of a Freedom of Information request filed on behalf of the Citizens Against UFO Secrecy (no doubt a sane, reputable group). Keep in mind that the USAF had round-filed their copy of the memo, considering the event insignificant. There's two ways to interpret a lack of interest. If you're paranoid, you'd assume that the government is covering up the "real" details. But the sane (albeit less sexy) explanation is that the item is simply uninteresting.

I recently had an interesting experience. No, I didn't see little green men. But I did have a close encounter (of the loony kind). A gentleman by the name of Mike Johnson (name altered for the purposes of ridicule) sent me an interesting letter. The second paragraph is worth reprinting in full:

"*My request is simple, but also extraordinary. Enclosed is some information about the topic, alien abductions, and a report on my progress in stopping alien abductions. Although I can't prove that UFOs exist or any related material is positively true, I have enough reports from people to convince me that it is and to keep making what I call 'thought screen helmets.'*"

Unlike competing tin foil hats, the "thought screen helmet" is 100% foolproof. But don't take my word for it! Johnson's not just the president. He's also a client. If the thought screen helmet can protect Johnson from alien abductions, it can do the same for you! Johnson even describes his creation—"*the thought screen helmet is a*

leather hat which has 8 sheets of 3M Velostat, .006" thick."

There're two kinds of conspiracy theories. One is the type propagated by mental patients (like moon landing conspiracies). The other is based on a tiny morsel of truth. For example, one could theorize that big corporations conspire to disenfranchise the little guy. But the reality is far simpler—big corporations, like most entities, have their own interests at heart. There's no organized conspiracy with cackling super villains plotting world domination.

Belief of this sort springs from an intense desire to attach greater significance to events. We want to believe that our lives mean something. But sometimes, s*** just happens. Moreover, the vast majority of conspiracy theories share one commonality—a complete lack of evidence. In the theorists' minds, a single incongruity in the official account trumps all evidence to the contrary. Conspiracy theorizing can make for compelling television (i.e. The X-Files), as long as you take it for what it is—entertainment. The danger is when we take these paranoid delusions seriously.

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