



community to try to move this away from the cultural baggage and stigma of “UFO.”

PS: Do you see any evidence that that’s helped?

EGHIGIAN: Some people think so. I don’t know. I think the only thing that helps is the explicit recognition on the part of the Navy, and now the intelligence community, that maybe they have over the years erred too much on ridiculing pilots who said they saw something. Adopting a policy that says, “If you see something, say something”—that, I think, is going to be way more important than giving it a new name.

I don’t know that you get away from all the problems that exist by calling it a UAP. In many ways it’s helpful, because “aerial phenomenon” seems way more generic. When you call something “flying,” it implies it’s being steered. However, that term “phenomenon” also opens it up to a lot more interpretation that can now invoke all sorts of supernatural phenomena, not just aliens. It could be a fifth dimension. It could be a wormhole, you know, all these other things. So some people say that actually now clouds the picture. There are people who don’t believe this is terrestrial technology, and they don’t necessarily believe it’s aliens. They think this is something else, some other kind of phenomenon.

PS: Do you mean something in the spiritual realm?

EGHIGIAN: Some people wonder that. Alternative realities, other dimensions.

PS: Are you covering that stuff in your book?

EGHIGIAN: I do as much as I can. There’s only so much I can do with it. That’s its own huge rabbit hole. And fortunately, there are scholars who work on that kind of stuff, and they’re way better informed, so I cite them. The UFO phenomenon from a very early phase was understood and seen as having highly significant meaning at a spiritual level. And it very quickly was folded into sort of the New Age movement of spirituality, and also end-of-the-millennium kind of thought: 1947, ’50, they were only 50 years away from the millennium, and a lot of people were wondering about the end of days and a new world order, a new universe order.

PS: Are you changing “UFOs” to “UAPs” in your book?

EGHIGIAN: No, absolutely not. The “UAP” designation leaves me cold. It’s so dry; it’s so antiseptic. There’s no color to it. I really like “flying saucer.” It’s very evocative.

PS: You recently attended a conference at Ohio State about the politics of unidentified aerial phenomena. What did you learn there?

EGHIGIAN: I think the biggest takeaway for me was that academia is becoming more receptive to the idea that UAPs, UFOs, whatever you want to call them, are phenomena worthy of academic study. The fact that you’ve got SETI scholars and political scientists, people who work on foreign policy and people who study intelligence, people who work in fields like crisis intervention for natural disasters, all saying, There are things for us to consider here. It indicates not only the idea that there’s something valuable in studying this stuff, but that maybe doing it invariably leads you to learn about other things you didn’t intend to.

There were at least two papers that asked how should society react if we find evidence of extraterrestrial civilizations, either up there or down here? How do we respond to that? So they’ve worked out different scenarios. And the argument there could be that just working out scenarios like that maybe helps you the next time there’s a crisis like 9/11, or a pandemic like COVID-19. You can learn something from thinking this through in some way. And that, to me, was fascinating to see.

PS: The very existence of such a conference there also lends the whole idea that “some UFOs might be alien technology” a sense of legitimacy.

STILL A MYSTERY
Recently declassified footage of U.S. Navy pilots encountering fast-moving unidentified objects bolstered the case of alien enthusiasts but fell short of definitive identification.



U.S. NAVY / PUBLIC DOMAIN (GIMBAL)

EGHIGIAN: Yeah. And some people don’t like that. There are a lot of initiatives now in the works. NASA has never been involved before, and it has this UAP pilot study it’s doing. You’ve got a new organization, The Society for UAP Studies, a body of academically trained people studying it as you would any other society, like the American Historical Association. I’m on the advisory board of it, and they’re going to be publishing a peer-reviewed academic journal soon.

I just don’t see any reason why academia can’t ask big questions about big [subjects] that matter to people. Part of why I want to be involved and why I think other academics should be involved in this kind of enterprise is to bring what we academics bring to the study of these things, which is not just our knowledge but our skepticism. We are inherently skeptical about things. And that has admittedly been lacking in much of the focus on UFOs for many decades. Not the skepticism of the debunker who’s out there to ridicule people for their beliefs or to be some sort of moral police, but really to sit there and say, Let’s study this like we do other phenomena. There are a lot of different perspectives to bring into the fold, and we have to do it on a strictly empirical basis and let the data speak for itself.

PS: Why do you think it has taken 70-plus years for us to get this far?

EGHIGIAN: I think there are two things. One, you’ve always needed key figures to play a role. You need people who have some sort of academic, cultural authority, and people like Avi Loeb, people like Alexander Wendt at Ohio State, that have helped to make it easier for people to say, This stuff at the very least warrants a conversation rather than whispers in the cafeteria. The other thing that has changed a lot of ideas has been the discovery of exoplanets in astronomy. It seemed like it was maybe a possibility before, but a lot of people used to believe they’re very rare. Now they’re coming to the view that exoplanets are in fact pretty common.

PS: So the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere becomes plausible just by the laws of probability?

EGHIGIAN: Yeah. Now the view is, it’s probably the case that there are extraterrestrial civilizations out there.

PS: A Gallup poll from 2021 shows the number of people who said they thought that some UAPs are likely alien spacecraft had gone up by 10 percentage points in just two years, which was I guess evidence of that?

EGHIGIAN: Yeah, you could expect that. In the United States, I would say the figure has been around a quarter, at most a third of the population saying, “I think UFOs are aliens.” What I think often gets ignored is that usually the largest number is the “I don’t know,” or “no opinion,” which tells you some people don’t care. That’s where the persuasion comes in, that’s why the debunkers want to get in and grab

those people, the believers want to grab those people, almost like a political campaign.

PS: What’s something unexpected you’ve learned through doing this research?

EGHIGIAN: There were stereotypes and biases I had going in that I think a lot of us have, that for instance anybody who wants to study UFOs is somebody who thinks that UFOs are alien technology. That’s not true. There’s a survey that was done of British ufologists in the 1980s that found that most of them didn’t believe UFOs were alien technology. They had a wide set of different views about the subject.

Also, it was surprising to find out that surveys have shown the higher your level of education, the more likely you are to believe that UFOs are alien technology. The lower your level of education, the more likely you are to be skeptical. So people who don’t go beyond grade school or high school are typically the people most skeptical about UFOs. You can also break this down regionally. The southeastern part of the United States is more skeptical, the Northeast and the West Coast more open to the idea. This flies in the face of the common stereotype—I think you can call it a prejudice—that the UFO believer is some backward, rural person who doesn’t know any better. No. The likeliest person is somebody who’s got a Ph.D. or a law degree or is an engineer and lives in Boston rather than somebody living in rural Louisiana.

PS: Why do you think that is? Maybe college-educated people are more inclined to read about the latest research regarding the universe?

EGHIGIAN: I think that’s part of it. Look, the UFO thing as a social phenomenon, as a movement, has always been a very literary movement. It’s about reading and writing. When they started to create this field of ufology, what they did was model it on academia. You know, let’s build organizations, let’s publish periodicals, let’s have conferences, let’s do field work. It’s a very reading-, writing-, and debating-driven endeavor.

PS: You mentioned the PSETI Center here at Penn State. How involved are you there?

EGHIGIAN: I’m in touch with those folks, and I try to go to many of their weekly meetings. It’s a worthy endeavor. SETI has never gotten the kind of funding and attention it required from inside academia. I know that SETI scholars still struggle with getting the recognition of their colleagues when it comes to things like funding. But the people you talk to there are serious scholars, serious researchers, imaginative, innovative, inventive. They’re among the most fascinating academics I know, because they’re ready to think outside the box. And that to me is really exciting.

PS: So, do you believe there’s anything out there?

EGHIGIAN: My very unsatisfying answer is: I don’t know. 🍷