

Techtopia with Chitra Ragavan

Episode 12: Bryan Cunningham

Chitra Ragavan:

UFOs are back in the news. After decades of secrecy, the American public and especially UFO believers are waiting eagerly for a report from the defense department to Congress this month. The report is expected to reveal what our military, law enforcement and intelligence agencies know, and most importantly, don't know about unidentified aerial phenomena or UAPs. That's the government's fancy new terminology for UFOs. Hello, everyone. I'm Chitra Ragavan, and this is Techtopia.

Chitra Ragavan:

The upcoming report would have been a wish come true for Bryant and Helen Reeve. Between 1953 and 1955, one of the most prolific periods in US history for UFO sightings, that Detroit Michigan couple traveled 23,000 miles over a two-year period, conducting a detailed oral history of so-called sorcerers. Those who had witnessed flying saucers. The Reeves documented their oral history in a fascinating book called Flying Saucer Pilgrimage, published in 1957. Here now to tell us more about Bryant and Helen Reeve and their extraordinary UFO journey is the grandson, my friend, Brian Cunningham. Cunningham is executive director of the Cybersecurity Policy and Research Institute at UC Irvine. He's an international expert on cybersecurity law and policy, a former White House lawyer and advisor, and a media commentator on cybersecurity, technology and surveillance issues. Brian, welcome to Techtopia.

Bryan Cunningham:

Thank you, Chitra. It's wonderful to be here. I don't know if I'm the only person who's appeared on both of your excellent podcasts, but I'm happy to be one of them. I really like the Techtopia approach. It's been great so far. Hopefully I won't ruin it today.

Chitra Ragavan:

Oh, it's an honor and privilege, Brian. 67 years ago, on December 16th, 1954, your grandparents, Bryant and Helen Reeves, wrote a letter to president Dwight Eisenhower and they were not happy with him. What was their beef with the president and what was their advice to him?

Bryan Cunningham:

It's fascinating for me to read this telex in the book as an intelligence officer. Just think about the fact for a second, that this was literally using the Telegraph. And as they say in the book, I think they were sending it from Mexico and they paid 52 pesos to send it, but what they were really doing and if they were alive today, what I'm sure they would

have done is they were filing a freedom of information act request. There was no legal mechanism for them to do that in 1954. So in some ways we've come a long ways.

Bryan Cunningham:

What they essentially were saying to president Eisenhower was, "We deeply admire you, great war hero. You should overrule all of the Luddites in the Department of Defense that work for you and release everything the government knows about UFOs. We have a constitutional right to know," they said. And furthermore, the air of secrecy that the US government, in their view, was putting around the subject matter was so different from what a lot of other countries were doing in terms of talking about it openly, that it actually made people much more fearful than they needed to be. I would say finally, this piece of mail has been answered with the new report.

Chitra Ragavan:

For you personally, it must be fascinating because you are in the national security space, you're an expert on surveillance, but also on civil liberties and privacy. The fact that they were asking president Eisenhower, be transparent, be open, do your duty to your citizens, it must be really eerie almost to see that given where you are today.

Bryan Cunningham:

Well, I have multiple minds about this entire subject, which is perhaps appropriate given some of the metaphysical philosophies that my grandparents discussed in the book. As a trained intelligence officer, I'm supposed to focus on the facts, and just the facts as Joe Friday would have said on Dragnet. But part of what people don't realize about intelligence analysis is that in most cases is much more art than science because by definition, if you are the president, you have to turn to your intelligence services to explain something to you. It means you don't know everything about it. So we're trained also to be very comfortable with putting ourselves out on a limb and interpreting uncertainty. So to me, the fact that my grandparents were pretty candid and repeated in saying, "We don't know everything, we probably don't know much of anything, but we're trying to connect the dots with the information that we do have," is very consistent with what I would do as an intelligence officer.

Bryan Cunningham:

Now, I'm not saying in any way, shape or form that I agree with or endorse everything that's in this book, but the process that they went through, and my grandfather was a trained engineer, is not that different from what you would do if you were an intelligence analyst and you were faced with very little information. I'll also know just as a strange historic echo, they might say, or frequency vibration, that one of my first jobs as a baby lawyer at the Central Intelligence Agency was processing Freedom of Information Act request. And one of the most common Freedom of Information Act request that we would get is tell us everything you know about the UFOs. This was in the mid nineties, and it was so common that we actually had a package that was pre-created. And when we got a letter, or I guess probably was before an email, we got a letter under the

Freedom of Information Act, we would just send out this package of information. So it's strange how these things echo through, at least my history.

Chitra Ragavan:

In that package, was it mostly denial? What was it, I'm curious to know, how did you approach it?

Bryan Cunningham:

Well, let me caveat that by saying that I'm operating now on what, 30-year-old memories plus. It was newspaper articles, but it was also as I recall, and I'm sure one of your listeners probably could find this somewhere on the internet, that it also included government documents that had been redacted. You're familiar having read the book and become versed in this subject and read the New Yorker piece, about Project Blue Book. Well, Project Blue Book was a real thing that the air force conducted and they really did create actual reports. In fact, I can't prove this, but I believe I remember my grandmother in the seventies actually having a document that purported to be a redacted version of Project Blue Book report. And now you can go on Amazon and get it. I haven't done that for this podcast, but my guess is if you flip through that book, you would see a lot of the same redacted documents that were in the CIA Freedom of Information Act request.

Chitra Ragavan:

Former president Barack Obama recently made, I thought it was a stunning admission acknowledgement. He said to talk show host James Corden, that there are footage and records of objects in the sky that we don't know how they move their trajectory, and that people take it seriously that they're trying to investigate and figure out what that is. He also said that it was one of the first things he asked about upon taking office. You're a former top CIA lawyer, former Justice Department prosecutor, cybersecurity, national security expert. What do you make of his admission?

Bryan Cunningham:

You have to believe that that is one of the first questions almost any president asks when they step into the Oval Office for the first time, especially given the famous scene in Independence Day, where the president tells a civilian, "Oh, that's ridiculous. We don't have anything in Roswell." Then as CIA director says, "Excuse me, sir, but that's not entirely accurate." What is a huge sign of the changing times is that you actually now have a former president who is willing to say that in public. Former presidents are not free to say anything they want. As a sitting president, you can make a decision on the spot to declassify information. As a former president, you don't have that authority. So my guess is that at some point since he's left office, president Obama cleared that statement with whoever was the current president at the time. I don't know if he did it under Trump or Biden, but it's, I think, really, really important for a couple of reasons.

Bryan Cunningham:

One is, it shows our people, the American people and people around the world, that we're willing to at least be somewhat transparent about these issues. The second thing, and I hadn't really focused on this until I re-read Bryant and Helen's book, is throughout at least modern history, most people who have had the nerve to publicly acknowledge and talk about unidentified flying objects have been ostracized and marginalized and attacked and insulted and they can't do that anymore. Well, I suppose people who think president Obama lies in public about things like this can still do that, but very much harder to marginalize a journalist or a private researcher as my grandparents were once you have a president who has acknowledged the possibility.

Chitra Ragavan:

If they were here today, given their very specific advice to president Eisenhower, which eerily the seven recommendations that they had most of that is actually coming true today, including encouraging people in the military to report these sightings as you've actually seen happen in the last month or two. But if they were here today and given that president Obama's comments, what would your grandparents' reaction be, do you think?

Bryan Cunningham:

I think if they had lived till this day and had lived through the previous 70 years of no president doing that, they would be very angry that it took this long. I think they would be surprised at it took this long based on what they wrote in the book. I think they would be happy that it's finally been done, but I think they would re-recommend a commission of unimpeachable outside experts to be given access to all the classified information and write a public report that was subject to minimal government control.

Bryan Cunningham:

I don't think they would say, declassify everything if it's a threat to our security, legitimate threat to our security, but don't keep things secret just because we think people are going to be frightened or that it will cause too much controversy. I think they had a lot more faith, frankly, in the common sense and wisdom and rationality of American voters than a lot of our politicians do. I think they would say, bring it on. We can handle it.

Chitra Ragavan:

Tell us what you know and remember about your grandparents. How are you related to them and do you remember them talking to you about UFOs?

Bryan Cunningham:

Well, my actual middle name is Bryant with a T. We don't like to talk about the H word, my first name. I dropped the T sometime in my twenties because no one could pronounce Bryant Cunningham, but I'm actually named after Austin Bryant Reeve, although I'm actually not related to him by blood. He was my father's mother's second or third, it's a little bit left to the midst of history, husband. Helen Reeve is my blood grandfather, but Bryant Reeve is not a relation of mine. I went back and actually pulled

his obituary in preparation for this. And he died earlier than I thought. He died in 1968. I was less than six years old, I was about six years old when he died. I have very few memories of my life at that age. I don't remember much about Bryant Reeve, but I do remember that he was very formal, but also very warm and incredibly analytic.

Bryan Cunningham:

He's a trained engineer and he chose his words very carefully and he didn't tend to, as far as I could tell at that age, and I've also talked to my older brother who had a lot more contact with him, he didn't tend to just fly off the handle and speculate. So to read everything that's in the book, again, it's not that I think it's all real, but I think he would have been careful about at least being able to source most of the things he said to another person. My grandmother, Helen Reeve, I remember a lot more because she didn't die until the mid eighties. It's interesting if you look them up on Amazon, there's a second book, it's called *The Advent of the Cosmic Viewpoint*. I was unable to get a copy of it, but her name is not on that book.

Bryan Cunningham:

So it makes me wonder, did he start to be a little bit more out there in her view and she didn't want her name on the second book? I don't know, my brothers don't know, my father and my mother are long gone. Helen Reeve at the end of her life, when I knew her best, was pretty beaten down by life. She'd been a single mom during the Depression and had had a lot of hardship in her life, notwithstanding the fact that she got this great adventure in the fifties. I remember her as not all that pleasant to be around, but I'm reminded of a line from some movie that I can't remember. We can go dab it in later if I find it. That the main character might've been filled of dreams, the main character at one point says, "I only knew my father when he was old and broken." And to be able to meet, if he was filled of dreams, meet his father and see him as a young person, I think he was a very different person.

Bryan Cunningham:

I think a lot of what's in the book that's more colorful and descriptive and anecdotal is probably her because she was very open to all kinds of ideas. I think she was a little bit, by the time the seventies rolled around, of I don't want to say a coop, but let me give you an example. My grandfather was dead by this point, she had a garage full of powdered food that had there been a nuclear Holocaust, presumably she would have lived on like a survivalist would do now. But of course, it makes no sense because if you survive a nuclear war, you're never going to have time to eat the powdered food that's in your garage, because if you don't have a bunker, you'll be gone. She was, I think followed all her life by the work that they did with the UFOs. I think they really believed that without the intervention of some higher power, we would blow ourselves up. Thank goodness they were wrong about that at least up until now.

Chitra Ragavan:

Did she speak to you about UFOs and to your parents and how did they feel about all this? I mean, your dad was a minister. So I would imagine he had some very definite thoughts on all of this.

Bryan Cunningham:

It's really interesting to have read or re-read this book 20 years after my father's death. I recall him being quite embarrassed at the entire topic of this book. He didn't want to talk about it with my brothers. I think he probably would have preferred that we never read it. At the time when I was probably in my teens to thirties, is when we would have talked about this occasionally. I assumed that the reason he was so embarrassed about it or didn't want to talk about it was that he just felt it was kooky and he didn't like the fact that he came from the stock of people that would buy into this stuff. But then later, as I read the book, I thought a lot of what informed my father's philosophy is in the book. Most importantly, he would tell me, and this is certainly not the Episcopal churches doctrine. He was an Episcopal minister.

Bryan Cunningham:

He would tell me, I've never forgot, that if there is a higher being or higher consciousness or God and they want it to universally inform humanity, it's ridiculous to expect that they would reveal themselves, she would reveal herself, whatever, in the same way, in the same form, with the same words to societies all across human history and with all different cultures and languages. I remember him saying, "If you look at the fundamental tenets of the great religions and even most other religious beliefs, they're really quite similar." His theory was that this was not that there were a hundred different supreme beings. It was that whatever's out there revealed itself to different cultures in different ways. If you read the book, pretty much what they say.

Chitra Ragavan:

How did it all get started with your grandparents and this UFO adventure? I think it started at a dinner party or something in their house.

Bryan Cunningham:

Yeah, based on my conversations with my brother, they were socialites to some extent, I don't think they were extremely wealthy, but they must've had a fair amount of resources to be able to just drop everything and go on this 23,000 mile drive. But they would have salons in their apartment or their condo in Detroit. They would have friends over to talk about different ideas and different things that were happening. None of us, three brothers, have any recollection of it, I wasn't alive, but it's very consistent with the way my brother described them. That they would have at one of these salons, as they talk about it in the first chapter of the book, had an intellectually curious friend who said, "Hey, I just read this book by a guy who is researching flying saucers and wasn't interesting."

Bryan Cunningham:

Then they, according to the book, which is consistent with what my brother remembers about them, had enough means to be semi-retired and just go on this pilgrimage to try to record their understanding of what the people who claim to have had encounters with flying saucers believed. I think there's clearly an evolution in the book. I think at the beginning, if you believe the narrator, my grandfather was very skeptical and not even particularly interested in it. Then it just, the ball got rolling and they met more and more and more people that whether they were credible or not, they found them to be credible. They just, some would say, went deeper and deeper down the rabbit hole. Others would say went deeper and deeper into the investigation. You can just tell that they were consumed by it. They read tons of stuff. Both of my brothers have this memory, by the way, I don't. Both of my brothers have a memory many, many, many years later, of going to their home in Virginia Beach and having an entire office filled with books about UFOs with reel-to-reel tape recording of interviews with saucers.

Bryan Cunningham:

It scared my brothers, both of them at different times, they're both little kids, scared them to the point where one of my brothers called his mother and insisted that he be sent home. And he was, he left. I don't remember it that way at all. I remember the books being around and I remember my grandmother, I remember Bryant Reeve was gone by the time I had much contact with him. I remember her telling me stories about UFOs and I have a memory of going out in the backyard and having her point to the sky and there was a shooting star too and her saying that could be one of them. But I never was afraid by it. I don't know if that's just a difference in what was happening in the world when I got exposed to it, or maybe she somehow presented it in a less threatening way than my grandfather did for my older brother, but I was never afraid by it. I don't think she was afraid by it. What she was more afraid of, as I said, is that the higher beings would fail to prevent humanity from destroying itself.

Chitra Ragavan:

Reading the book, it was interesting how some of these cast of characters were straight out of central casting. I mean, this stories were so implausible in some ways and yet there was something about it. Your grandparents, like you said, didn't show a lot of skepticism. They were just doing what we talked about as an oral history. But a lot of the other people were either highly educated, like your grandpa who was MIT Yale trained engineer, or they were technical. They had technical skills, even if they had gotten just out of high school, mostly male. That added some element of credibility. The fact that they had technical skills, some of them worked at Lockheed with Howard Hughes. It was really an interesting mix of people.

Bryan Cunningham:

Yeah. There's another thread to it that I picked up on, which is, some of them were, as you say, had some technical or mechanical abilities and background, but were in, I think my grandfather's view who was a Yale MIT elite. He was really one of the elite. You get this feeling that he, in some ways, gave more credibility to the salt of the earth people that he talks about, particularly there's a Mexican chauffeur he talks about. He talks about their humbleness and their lack of grandiosity and their lack of self aggrandizement and

their plain-spokenness. It feels to a 21st century reader, a little bit elitist and condescending, and maybe it was, but I think what he's trying to say is these people were really too honest and too plain-spoken to be making it all up. That's what I took away from that part of it.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah, definitely. And that was a recurring theme and there were other recurring themes as well. One was you mentioned your grandma having this garage full of powdered milk, but one of the main themes was the nuclear war. The sense that maybe that had something to do with these flying saucers. That they were some kind of weapons vehicles or things like that. You see that throughout the book and they're concerned about it and other people are concerned about it. So just put this in the context of history of where we were at that time period.

Bryan Cunningham:

Well, of course I wasn't around, but I am a bit of a science fiction fan. They say that the science fiction of any particular era quite directly reflects the prevailing anxieties at the time. And if you look at science fiction that was produced, for example, in the 2000s after 9/11, it's very allegorical to 9/11. I think what people in the fifties and sixties were reacting to was this overarching threat of nuclear destruction. I'm old enough to remember in middle school having to do the exercises where we got under our desk, that was going to protect us if there was a really a nuclear war, but having a lot of angst about that. I think that informs a lot of their writing.

Bryan Cunningham:

There's also somewhat shocking to me, very direct references to what we would now call climate change. I haven't been able to go back and do the research to determine whether a lot of these ideas that are in their book, fear of nuclear war, fear of climate change. This idea that there are higher beings out there that are here but they're not scary because they're protecting us. The ideas that eventually we'll have a society where money doesn't matter, where humans can pursue their learning and their higher selves, where there's no need for governments or law enforcement or war. A lot of the stuff in the book, and I actually marked them with a special color post-its, are the animating ideas behind Star Trek. Like I said, I haven't gone back to see if all these ideas were just floating around out there in the fifties and sixties, which I suspect, or Gene Roddenberry plagiarized from my grandparents. But if so, I want my damn royalties, Gene Roddenberry.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you would know because you're a big Star Trek fan.

Bryan Cunningham:

It is quite remarkable, all kidding aside. Lots of these pages in the book could have been written by Gene Roddenberry, the creator of Star Trek. Again, I don't know if this was what was out there and everyone was thinking it, or he did research and came

across this book and others, but it's pretty striking. It's also, there's a lot of things in there that if you read them in a certain way, and I suppose I'm biased to have a positive read of it, but if you read them a certain way, they're quite prophetic.

Bryan Cunningham:

We talked about the telegram to president Eisenhower, the notion that we might have to face climate change one day. And there's another thing. They talk a lot about the idea that humans view the universe as empty space, outer space as empty, except where we can see physical things like planets, like stars, like galaxies. And their argument is, I don't know where they picked this up in their travels, but what their philosophy was, was that no, no, no. That makes no sense. The universe is probably actually full, outer space is probably full of objects and beings. But humans, in our current stage of development, don't have the ability to understand that.

Bryan Cunningham:

Well, guess what just came out in the last couple of years? The proof of the existence of dark matter, which is, as I understand it, I'm no physicist, but is what scientists now believe occupies a lot of the space in which we can't see anything. That it's out there, the truth is out there, it's out there, but we don't yet have the ability to measure it and understand it and process it. So some of that stuff gives you a little bit of chills when you read it in the mid 21st century.

Chitra Ragavan:

The most prophetic chapter in the book is the one where you're strolling along and they're talking about all these people they've met. All of them have seen UFOs and these great descriptions and narratives, both in the US and then they go on to Mexico for their wrap or retired for their big Mexico adventure post retirement. They start saying that they themselves saw a UFO. And then there's the chapter where they meet up with a person who they describe as a clairvoyant and a clairaudient, that's the first time I heard that word, a medium or what they call a cosmic telephone, a man by the name of Mark Probert. Then they're now talking to some inner circle of wise people, maybe aliens, maybe not. Talk about that chapter because that is a big in the narrative, then starts to talk about the universe as we know it.

Bryan Cunningham:

Yeah, to say the least. Yeah. When I would describe this book to people, I read it when I was a teenager and I hadn't read it again until this week, when I describe this book to people, I would always say, "Okay, you're going along for the first half of it. And it's weird. They're writing down some very weird stuff, but it's always them reporting what someone else told them." Initially without judgment, and then I think as the narrative goes on, they become a little more predisposed to just believe these people and give them credibility and then full stop, they're conversing with the aliens.

Bryan Cunningham:

I always thought that's probably where my dad got super embarrassed. He didn't want us to think that we had blood flowing in us of people who felt like they talked to the aliens. The way I remembered it all these years was it just happened. All of a sudden, there's just a transcript of their conversation with the aliens. It's actually not that way. As you say, what they spent two whole chapters, I think, first of all, preparing the reader that they're about to go off the rails and maybe you want to get off the train now, almost in those words. And then describing this person, Mark Probert and their conversations with him that led up to the Q&A with the aliens. And if you Google, which I'm sure you have some of the figures in the book, including Mark Probert, they'll often take you to webpages of things like pseudo science or fake science or charlatans or kooks.

Bryan Cunningham:

I did some of that research because I wanted to see if my grandparents appeared in any of those, which I don't think they do, but Probert does. They talk a lot about how he wasn't, I guess, even primarily a saucer as my grandparents would say, he was a medium. They called him a sensitive, someone who claimed that they could speak to other intelligences and other beings. You think of a medium, you normally think of someone that says they can converse with your grandparents who are dead at a seance. So as you say, it's not even so much that Probert claims to be getting replies to my grandparents questions from space people. It's this wise council of elders, I would say, that's my word, not theirs, from throughout human and alien history who are not necessarily the space people, but they're relating what they think the space people are. And supposedly this council has something like perfect knowledge.

Bryan Cunningham:

I would love to know, and I don't think there's any way to find out now because my older brother doesn't remember. The mechanics of how this happened was my grandfather sitting in a room with Probert who was typing. Because they talk about how sometimes he'll just type things and he won't know what he's typing and sometimes it's in other languages and all that. Because what's striking about the whole episode, whether or not you believe there's any truth to any of it, is somebody that was involved in that knew an awful lot about an awful lot of things that are accurate in terms of global history, in terms of religious tenets, in terms of ancient philosophies and societies.

Bryan Cunningham:

If it was any real time thing where my grandfather is sitting there with Probert and Probert's typing, or more impressively yet reciting things that my grandfather is typing down, that's pretty breathtaking. Because that means somebody, I'm assuming there's no inner counsel and he wasn't actually conversing with higher beings. But if he wasn't, somebody, Bryant Reeve, Mark Probert or someone else knew an awful lot about an awful lot of things, which would be breathtaking. I think what's more likely is they probably mailed him the questions and he sent them back answers. In which case, theoretically, he could have researched it all. But even then it's pretty impressive, the breadth of what he talks about.

Chitra Ragavan:

And that's where the book becomes almost an anthology of man's struggle for enlightenment and preventing global warming and environmental and nuclear destruction. It just simply, it's just a complete change in tone and feel of the book. It's fascinating.

Bryan Cunningham:

Yeah. And I think they almost say that in so many words. It's almost like they get to the point where they determine that the existence or nonexistence of flying saucers is not important. What's important is the, they would probably say essential cosmic truths that sometimes get relayed to us in their worldview, by people from what we would think of as other planets or outer space, but sometimes not. Sometimes it comes to you in a dream. Sometimes it comes to Mark Probert in a dream. Sometimes you find it in ancient native American writing. Sometimes you'll find it in Indian writings. It's almost like Bryant Reeve got bored with whether or not flying saucers are real and shifted entirely into this really metaphysical, philosophical, religious discussion. Because he tries pretty hard also to tie these concepts that supposedly are being told to us by the space people, to Christian religion in the Bible. I would say it's not entirely successful, but he makes a pretty good run at it.

Bryan Cunningham:

You really get the feeling that they closed, metaphorically closed the book on flying saucers and moved entirely into this philosophical realm. I would cite one other piece of evidence for that, as I mentioned, the other book that's published under his name is called *The Advent of the Cosmic Viewpoint*. I could not find a copy of that book, but my older brother recalls that that second book has almost nothing to do with flying saucers. It's entirely about mysticism and philosophy and whatever other ideas were floating around in the early sixties at that point.

Chitra Ragavan:

One of my favorite things in the book is where they say, "We've broken the sound barrier. Now it's time for us to break the cosmic barrier." Which I thought was really amazing.

Bryan Cunningham:

Yeah. Well, this is another thing. They go through this whole theory and they try to convince you that the right metaphor is a television, which is interesting because that would have just been brand new technology when they were writing. Where they go through this whole theory that the reason why humans at our stage of evolution don't see these, most of us, don't see these other planes of existence where these other beings are. Interestingly enough, my grandfather's theory is there are beings on other planes of existence that are much more advanced than we are and much less advanced than we are. It's not universally saying that every other type of being is more advanced than we are, but the analogy he uses is that the universe "vibrates at different frequencies." And that if you were watching a television in the early fifties when he was

writing, that you would only be able to receive and understand the world as it was transmitted on the frequencies that your television antenna was able to pick up.

Bryan Cunningham:

That if you could tune into different frequencies, you would see a whole other type of existence. Well, 2021, there's a lot of physicists who believe that there are infinite numbers of parallel universes of existence, and we just can't see them. In fact, Einstein's theory, which would have been accessible to my grandfather at the time, so I certainly wouldn't say my grandfather created this, but Einstein's theory of space-time is basically that there's a continuum of space and time. And if you can bend it, which Einstein predicted massive black holes, for example could do, you could immediately be transported between universes. They're using different words, but they're saying the same thing.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah. They so much that is coming true today, or at least is relevant in our conversations today, especially climate change. And the fact that the department of defense is actually admitting that they do have an unidentified aerial phenomenon task force, something that would have been a welcomed development to your grandparents had they been here today, and to all those people who've been told that they're really imagining things. We just don't know what it is yet, but as your grandparents noted several times in their book, many other countries in Europe, nations such as Brazil have been open to the idea of UFOs going back decades. Now, you've been in many, many classified environments in intelligence and law enforcement positions, you provided legal advice to the president and the National Security advisor, the National Security Council. What is the secrecy and denial around UFOs say about our national security culture, if anything good and bad?

Bryan Cunningham:

Well, first of all, I think it's just tremendous that these Navy and Air Force pilots are now being allowed to tell their stories and being backed up by the Pentagon releasing the videos. Again, one of the things my grandparents talked so much about is how anyone who spoke out about these things even 70 years ago, was subject to endless ridicule and dismissal. That's what's so important about what president Obama said and about the fact that they're going to release this report. Although we can talk about it later, I suspect there's going to be less than meets the eye there. But it gives credibility to these pilots who want to tell their story and they're being allowed to tell their story. And I have to say, the radar images and the video that the Defense Department has released, coupled with the narrative of these pilots, again, is very, very consistent with the types or the shapes of these objects, the way they can move, the lack of any visible source of propulsion, the speeds they can attain, how they can blink in and out of the sensors.

Bryan Cunningham:

That's all very consistent with lots of stuff that's in the book. And also things like Winston Churchill, one of his senior air officers during World War II claimed that he had fought

these things. By the way, little aside here, I don't know if it fits anywhere in the final podcast, but they have this whole chapter on definitions. And one of their definitions talks about a type of saucer-like things flaming balls, they called them, that pilots in World War II on the allied side would see and assume were German secret weapons. And the German pilots would see and assume they were American secret weapons. And now putting on my musician hat for a second, those were called foo fighters, F-O-O fighters. So I looked this up and sure enough, that's where the band, the foo fighters got their name.

Chitra Ragavan:

Fascinating.

Bryan Cunningham:

Yeah. But let me just say one other thing, which I think is really important. And others have said this too, but having been in senior intelligence, National Security positions, if the videos that the pilots have commented on have been released, if any of them are accurate, if there are non-natural phenomenon that can move the way those things move and have the technology that they have to have, I hope to God that that's alien technology. Because if it's the Chinese or the Russians or the Iranians or any other nation on earth, we are in deep, deep trouble because that technology, I've seen it described as thousands of years ahead of ours.

Chitra Ragavan:

Wow. And that is one of the concerns according to leaked information, in advance of this report being released, that the concern in the US government is if this were Russian or Chinese or Iranian technology, that they're experimenting with hypersonic speed, that that would be a real concern. But won't you be more worried if it were aliens who had that technology more than the Russians and the Chinese?

Bryan Cunningham:

No, because any civilization who had the ability to reach earth from what would have to be, unless you believe in the alternate planes of existence, light years to hundreds of light years beyond our solar system and to do the things it does, that society would undoubtedly be capable of destroying humanity if they wanted to. Particularly if they've really been here since at least the fifties. And as you know in the book, they quote a lot of other prior books that said they've been here forever. That there's evidence in ancient native American writings and others for that. If they have that capability and they haven't destroyed us yet, one, probably pretty good evidence they don't want to. And two, if they decide they want to, there's probably nothing we can do about it anyway. Whereas the Russians and the Chinese and the Iranians, we really do have to be prepared to protect our security against them.

Chitra Ragavan:

One of my favorite sentences, speaking of native Americans, is that they had referred to these things that they had seen as flying tortillas. I thought that was really sweet.

Bryan Cunningham:

Yes, as you know, there's a whole Mexican road trip in the book. And Mexico is one of those places that they quote as being, the government being much more open to allowing people to talk about this stuff. They made friends, according to them, with a newspaper editor at a pretty large, what sounded to me like a pretty large newspaper in Mexico city who was writing about this stuff week in, week out. Which gets a little bit the same point I wanted to make about the pilots. According to the reading I've done, and I think some of them have even said this in interviews, it wasn't like they saw these things once every blue moon, they saw them every day for years when they're out on their training missions in the early to mid, well, from like 2005 to 2017.

Bryan Cunningham:

Another hypothesis for what are referred to as UFOs could actually be, is top secret US government technology. The debunkers will say, "Well, of course the government is never going to let it be known that we have this sort of technology." So they're going to try to marginalize any talk about it by letting people think it's UFOs. Well, I don't doubt that that might've been true back in the forties and fifties. We know that we were testing the U2 spy plane, we know we were testing the SR71. We know now that that was happening in areas like Area 51 around that area. But today, I don't think that explanation cuts it because if these were top secret US government technology development programs, you would think that the government would be smart enough to not order Navy and Air Force pilots with video cameras and radar to fly in the same area we were testing those devices day in day out for years, that would be pretty stupid.

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah. In fact, a recent New York Times report that had some of this advanced information on this upcoming report said that the officials that they spoke to said it was definitely not American technology, which is why they're concerned about it. I'm curious, and you don't have to say one way or the other, because at some point you probably want to get another National Security clearance, but how do you feel about UFOs and flying saucers and how did your grandparents belief in them influence your life for good or bad?

Bryan Cunningham:

Well, taking the second one first, I think in preparing for this podcast, I've realized that it probably had a lot more influence on me than I thought when, and I had completely forgotten about this until we started talking about doing the podcast. When I was eight years old, I starred in a little small town theater production of a play called Let's Go to the Moon, a fantasy for children in three acts. And it's about this little boy, it was written in the fifties, interestingly enough, but it was about this little boy who is ridiculed by his sisters and his friends because he doesn't want to play with the normal stuff. He doesn't want to hear about fairytales and [inaudible 00:47:29] and things like that. He wants to go to the moon and be an astronaut. He has a dream where he gets to go to the moon and it turns out all the fairytale characters are real and they live on the moon and he gets to meet them and then he comes back to his real life.

Bryan Cunningham:

It's a little bit ripped off from The Wizard of Oz, but nonetheless, I had totally forgotten I was in that. And I have to believe that either in this small town, my grandmother actually somehow got them to produce this play because it was related to space travel, or at least strongly encouraged me to go do it. I don't have a recollection of that, but I know I wasn't a theater person at that point. After the play, when I was 11 years old, my grandmother, Helen Reeve, paid for a trip to Mexico with my father and I and she. I remember it extremely well because not only was it the first time I'd ever gotten on an airplane, it was the first time I'd ever gotten out of Ohio, and I was 11.

Bryan Cunningham:

I remember that we went to five or six different places. I don't remember all of them, but they were not necessarily obvious places you would go visit if you're going to be a tourist in Mexico in 1973 or something. I had forgotten most of the details of the trip, except I remember my grandmother was very insistent, sometimes making my dad very impatient and upset, that we visit certain places. Sometimes they were just open fields. What triggered this memory is in the book, they have a photograph of the Insurgentes or Insurgentes Theater in Mexico city. And I definitely remember her insisting that we fight through Mexico city traffic to go see that theater. I remember that facade of that theater, it's in black and white and the book, but it's super colorful native Mexican painting on it. As I was talking to both of my brothers getting ready for this podcast, my older brother said, when I mentioned this trip, he said, "Oh yeah, that's known in the family as the UFO field trip."

Bryan Cunningham:

I had forgotten this, but what she did is she dragged my dad and I to places in Mexico that she felt had significant UFO related events. And that theater is described in the book as the place where a very large, one of these UFO lectures took place in Mexico. But some of the places we went were just in the middle of nowhere, and I don't have a specific memory of this, but filling in the blanks, I'm pretty sure she was taking us to places that she thought people had had encounters with saucers.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's amazing.

Bryan Cunningham:

So there's that. And then I've always had strong curiosity about anything having to do with time travel faster than light travel issues in space. I don't have enough scientific or mathematical ability or background to really be an astrophysicist or anything like that, but I've always been really interested in that stuff. I suppose maybe there's a small part of me that hoped subconsciously that if I got more and more and higher and higher security clearances, someday I would be sitting in a meeting and I would learn the truth that's out there. Not that that's what motivated me to be an intelligence officer, but I have to believe that was a little bit in the back of my mind.

Bryan Cunningham:

To answer your \$64,000 question, I have never been briefed, classified or unclassified, with information that would answer the question, is the earth being visited by beings from another space or another dimension, or whether UFOs are real? I have, however, been briefed on a lot of things that at the time I learned of them, and some of them still now to this day, average people would find very difficult to believe, but I know that they're true. So I keep a very open mind about it, is the first part of the answer.

Bryan Cunningham:

Second part of the answer is just math. I forget the analogies that are used, but there are probably billions or hundreds of billions or trillions of planets that astronomers and astrophysicists know about in the universe. And there's probably many, many more than that that they don't know about. And then within that, I believe astrophysics already identified dozens, if not hundreds of planets that theoretically based on their distance from their stars, could support human life. So for us to sit here and think that we're the only intelligent life in the universe is not only arrogant, but also just inconsistent with math. And that math assumes that other intelligent life in the universe is like us. If it's not like us, if it doesn't need to breathe oxygen and nitrogen, if it's not carbon-based, then the numbers are infinite. So I'm keeping an open mind.

Bryan Cunningham:

As an intelligence officer, I think we'll see what's in this report, but I think you have to believe that the balance of likelihood is tipping in favor of the fact that there are other civilizations capable of travel here. As has been pointed out in the New Yorker article and elsewhere, these are not Mexican chauffeurs, no offense to Mexican chauffeurs, that are filing these video reports. These are pilots in the United States military that we spend millions of dollars to train to be observers. They need to be able to determine in a split second if something that's coming at them as a Russian MIG fighter jet or an American fighter jet, or a civilian airliner. The idea that this growing number of former pilots, and I'm sure there's a lot more that will come out, backed up by video and radar, are all hallucinating or wrong, or seeing the same weather balloons or whatever the other explanations are. That's getting highly unlikely in my view.

Chitra Ragavan:

So will this report raise more questions than it answers?

Bryan Cunningham:

I think it's likely that it will, and I think it'll be a Rorschach test too, a lot of these things. I think people who want to believe and are not threatened by believing that we're being visited by unidentified aerial phenomenon, as they call them, will believe it and they'll be happy about it. People that are in the business of debunking these things will probably find statements and citations in the report that they can use to debunk it. But if the leaks are true, I think the report will say that there are, I might get this number slightly wrong, but I feel like I read 120 incidents stated in the report that they cannot explain. That's a

lot because they've been at this, well, some believe the US government's been at this for 70 years, but for sure, this Pentagon task force has been at it for 16 years.

Bryan Cunningham:

If this report went through the same process that a US government official intelligence analysis document, what we used to call an intelligence estimate, actually went through, it was subjected to very rigorous argument within the various agencies of the US intelligence community, and probably would contain a number of footnotes where one or more intelligence agencies dissented from a particular point. If that stuff is omitted, if we just see the stuff that's in the project Blue Book report and not the debate among the intelligence services about the accuracy of various parts of the report, then I think it probably will raise more questions than answers. But what I'll do for sure is put yet another president on the record as saying that there seems to be things out there that we can't explain. And people who say that there are, are not crackpots, which in and of itself will be pretty important.

Chitra Ragavan:

I loved your grandparents' dedication and the front of the book where they speak to all the saucers of the world as they call them, wherever they may be. They say that someday they will have an opportunity to tell the world, I told you so. Maybe do think the time is now?

Bryan Cunningham:

I would like to think so. As you can imagine, my two brothers and I over the years, have kidded my dad and kidded each other and laughed a lot about this whole situation. And when the woman pilot's video came out and it was announced that this report was forthcoming, I texted my brothers and I said, "Finally vindication for the Reeves."

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah. In fact, we have the pilot, Alex Dietrich, on our other podcasts, When it Mattered, and she has some very amazing stories just like yours.

Bryan Cunningham:

I know, that's amazing. I can't wait to hear that. I'd love to know what she thinks of Flying Saucer Pilgrimage, but I wouldn't impose on her to read it. But yeah, it's just a very welcome development that we're, as a government, apparently about to not call these people crazy. That would make my grandparents very happy.

Chitra Ragavan:

Well, Brian, thank you so much for joining me on Tectopia and for this absolutely amazing conversation about your grandparents and their sweet oral history on UFOs.

Bryan Cunningham:

My pleasure. Truth is out there.

Chitra Ragavan:

Brian Cunningham is executive director of the Cybersecurity Policy and Research Institute at UC Irvine. He has extensive experience in senior US government intelligence and law enforcement positions. He served as deputy legal advisor to the then National Security advisor, Condoleezza Rice. He also served six years in the Clinton administration as a senior CIA officer and federal prosecutor. Brian drafted significant portions of the Homeland Security Act and related legislation, helping to shepherd them through Congress. He was a principal contributor to the first National Security Strategy to secure cyberspace, worked closely with the 9/11 Commission and provided legal advice to the president, National Security advisor, the National Security Council and other senior government officials on intelligence, terrorism, cybersecurity, and other related matters. This is Techtopia, I'm Chitra Ragavan.