

We Have Just Discovered an Important Note from Space

When the aliens finally landed, they did not do so in any of the expected places. They passed up the White House lawn, Cape Kennedy, Edwards Air Force Base, Area 51; and the various towns that call themselves “UFO Capital of the World”. Instead, their small silent ship alighted, early one morning, in Cleveland; right in front of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Predictably, pandemonium ensued. The scores of Clevelanders who fled in panic tangled with an inbound stampede of reporters, TV pundits, camera crews, fanatics of every conceivable and inconceivable sort, New Agers, charlatans, entrepreneurs, and plain ordinary gawkers. The Governor invoked the National Guard. The President dispatched the military in all its branches. Hopkins Airport was bedlam, Amtrak and Greyhound packed tighter than a Bombay rush-hour. Traffic jams broke all records, and every motel room in a hundred-mile radius quadrupled in price. The alien ship, meanwhile, remained meekly where it had landed. No monstrous invaders came forth, nor city-levelling death-rays.

Commentators all agreed that this was “The Most Important Event in Human History”, displaying as always their talent for redundancy. And yet, for once, the pundits were right. First Contact was a watershed for all: military, science, technology, art, culture – though not in a way anyone would have expected. In the case of Blackburn the astrophysicist and his husband, it even gained a modest step for gay rights, unremarked in the larger clamor. Not even the religious fascists noticed, engulfed as they were in hysterical debate over whether the aliens had souls.

Craig Blackburn had a Ph.D. in astrophysics, and an interest in “exobiology” – speculations on the possibility and nature of alien life. He taught the former subject at a local university, and wrote articles on the latter for popular magazines. When Ohio public TV one year did a miniseries on UFOs, they’d hired him as host, for he was affably handsome and at ease before the camera. PBS had picked up the series nationally, giving him a measure of fame. His name was raised by the President, in closed council to assemble a First Contact team. The President knew no more of Science and its mavens than the average TV viewer: aside from Isaac Asimov and Gene Roddenberry, both deceased, Craig Blackburn was the only expert he could think of. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were dubious, but the President, in a rare display of spine, insisted.