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Close Encounter

A Beltway satire complete with media pundits, secret agents and, of course, space aliens

By Marc Spiegler

In a time when hating Washington has become a national blood sport, every half-baked humorist attacks the capital. But few can match the ammunition at the disposal of veteran journalist Christopher Buckley, a congenital Beltway insider. Familiarity may breed contempt, but it also breeds fine satire, and in his fourth novel, "Little Green Men," Buckley's Washington teems with expediency and ego, hypocrisy and hype--and truth enough to make it all resonate.

The book opens with talk-show host John O. Banion, a bilious John McLaughlin or George Will type, humiliating the president for kicks. Having forced the county's chief executive to leave Crimp David on a Sunday morning so he can be flayed face-to-face, Banion then twists the knife by making the most powerful man on Earth sit through three commercial breaks, like some actor pimping for a new flick on "Oprah." Afterward, as Banion luxuriously rolls off in an English-made auto to an A-list brunch, we learn, "He'd paid for the car with two speeches--one of them on how to revitalize the U.S. auto industry--and he hadn't even had to leave town for them. More and more, he hated to leave town. Everything he needed was here."

And then suddenly, it isn't, thanks to Nathan Scrubbs. A wannabe CIA spook, Scrubbs. instead works for Majestic Twelve--a secret agency charged with perpetuating the myth of UFOs. Why the subterfuge? At first, to scare Josef Stalin into thinking the U.S. military had alien technology at their disposal. Then, later, to keep Americans edgy about the possibility of alien invasion, spurring support for space programs and elephantine military outlays. With a seemingly immense budget and zero oversight, Majestic Twelve unleashes an arsenal of facsimile phenomena--crop circles, cattle mutilations, flying saucers, abductions and even alien sex. The campaign works spectacularly; 80 percent of Americans believe that the government is hiding something about aliens. (Technically speaking, of course, they're -right.) The linchpin of the operation is choosing the right sort of victims, common people with enough credibility to get heard, but too little clout to raise any real ruckus.

People, in other words, exactly unlike John O. Banion. But, besotted on a Sunday morning, Scrubbs impetuously lines Banion up for abduction. Ambushed at the exclusive Burning Bush country club, Banion meets the "aliens" face-to-face, faints and awakes to find he has been "probed." Privately, Banion is

shaken. Publicly, he's mum. This only serves to further enrage Scrubbs, who engineers a second probing for the pundit. Now convinced that he has been chosen as a prophet, Banion begins proclaiming the aliens' existence at every turn. Rapidly, he loses his show, his friends and even his wife, But outside the corridors of power, he finds an army of followers, and eventually calls for a Millennium Mali March on Washington. Complications ensue.

As convoluted and over-the-top as the plot may be, however, it ultimately serves as just an ornate platter on which Buckley can serve up his insider *aperçus*, like a series of delicious but rapidly forgotten cocktail-party canapés. After a while, some readers may be ready for a real meal, and they won't find it here. For all its humor, "Little Green Men" remains as surface as the media melees Buckley lampoons. Throughout his ordeal, for example, Banion's character remains a whiny egotist, learning little more than the ephemeral nature of A-list status; Scrubbs goes from pathetic factotum to pathetic fugitive. The alien-seekers are mumbling margin walkers.

But so what, really? "Little Green Men" seems aimed only to amuse. At that, it succeeds, especially when Buckley is skewering the Washington he knows too well. Describing the CIA in a footnote, he quips, "Its main focus, in the post-Cold War era, has been to employ people who will sell vital classified information about it to foreign governments. Its current budget is estimated at \$27 billion per year, which may seem like a lot but is still not enough to enable it to find out if countries like India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons." And it hardly takes a Beltway maven to spot his archly drawn, thinly concealed Washington icons. Pamela Harriman, for instance, surfaces as Val Dalhousie, a former courtesan who "married up the food chain" until she reached steel-fortune heir Jamieson Vanbrugh Dalhousie, then curried favor with massive donations to presidential hopefuls. Finally one wins, and Val becomes the nation's envoy to the Court of St. James's. (Harriman died as ambassador to France). Buckley writes, "You could hear Jamieson moaning at the expense in his grave. Thirty million? You could have gotten Italy for half the price." Not sparing his colleagues either, Buckley sketches his media types as \$100 haircuts unspooling prepackaged news.

Granted, after what Washington has offered us in the last year, many readers will quite rightly run screaming from anything Beltway And should you happen to count among the half-dozen Americans who still hold politicians in high regard, Buckley's hubris-and-spin image of Washington will rankle. But for media junkies, pundit-haters and those who simply take pleasure in a fine-tuned verbal excoriation, "Little Green Men" offers respite from the Banion types and their Sunday-morning-sandbox battles.