

## In-Depth Look at The Battle of Los Angeles Conspiracy, Illusory Pattern Perception, and the Spread of Politicized Misinformation

Throughout history, human beings have been intrigued by the many mysteries our world possesses and how to best understand them. With most mysterious events occurring under the shroud of minimal public control, it is interesting to assess how these moments of helplessness can cause individuals to unite two separate mysteries as one. A primary example of early American conspiracies related to extraterrestrial visitation, The Battle of Los Angeles serves as an intriguing example in which an illusory correlation is drawn between fears of potential Japanese bombardment during the second World War and prevalent ideas of aliens in science fiction to create an overarching conspiracy of extraterrestrial invasion. Since The Battle of Los Angeles conspiracy narrative connects two unrelated yet prominent subjects in a false correlation, one can apply past research detailing how individuals can be predisposed to make such connections during times of excessive helplessness in order to logically breakdown the mystery at hand. By furthermore deconstructing this event, one can realize how much concrete detail is lacking, and how this leaves the public susceptible to believing in false alien-centered narratives. By studying this research, recorded details of the event, and political climates at the time, one can begin to view The Battle of Los Angeles conspiracy as a large scale illusory correlation and understand it in a perspective not previously considered.

Occurring on February 25<sup>th</sup> of 1942, The Battle of Los Angeles remains a point of intrigue to those studying America's ongoing alien conspiracy. While the events that conspired that day were originally considered a planned attack from the Japanese Imperial Air Service on the city of Los Angeles, the 1942 event is now considered to be a mass Unidentified Flying Object (U.F.O.) sighting. However, it is the lack of definite facts prevalent in the event that leaves the public susceptible to relying on popular narratives like that of the U.F.O. conclusion, creating this change in belief. Occurring a little over 2 months after Pearl Harbor and in the 2 days following the recent Bombardment of Ellwood<sup>1</sup> incident, this event remains a prominent example of extraterrestrial visitation in the American alien conspiracy lineage. At 2:25 in the morning, air-raid sirens sounded across Los Angeles as the city began a coordinated blackout as ordered by the United States Airforce. Nearly 10 minutes prior to this order, an unidentified aircraft was spotted on military radar 120 miles west of the coast heading in the direction of Los Angeles, however the object vanished from radar minutes after the blackout was executed. Around 2:36, citizens living in the Pacific Palisades area reported a massive aircraft coming into view from behind the Santa Monica Mountains, directly east of the earlier sighting. Following these scattered public reports and with no radar confirmation<sup>2</sup>, four anti-aircraft batteries were turned to face the incoming object, and began to fire shells upward. In documents discussing the event today, the most prominent of these accounts comes from C. Scott Littleton, who was eight years old at the time and who would later go on to study U.F.O.-related phenomena. Littleton's famous account places him right on the harbor as he claims to have seen a lozenge-shaped aircraft hanging over the coast of Hermosa Beach that glowed when it was caught in the air force's spotlights.<sup>3</sup> While Littleton's recollection of the event serves as the event's primary

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<sup>1</sup> Modugno, Tom. "Attack on Elmwood," Goleta History, October 19, 2014, <http://goletahistory.com/attack-on-ellwood/>; a Japanese submarine attack on a small oil repository off the coast of California.

<sup>2</sup> Not Listed, "The Battle of Los Angeles: 1942 UFO," The Wanderling, unlisted date, [http://the-wanderling.com/la\\_ufo.html](http://the-wanderling.com/la_ufo.html)

<sup>3</sup> Not Listed, "The Battle of Los Angeles: 1942 UFO," The Wanderling, unlisted date, [http://the-wanderling.com/la\\_ufo.html](http://the-wanderling.com/la_ufo.html)

narrative, many different accounts of the event were reported at the time. These narratives report Los Angeles citizens encountering everything from a whole squadron of planes to one singular blimp-like object. In addition, the shape of the craft widely varies in most accounts. While many claimed to have seen a blimp-like aircraft, others also reported a butterfly-like or saucer shape, leading many to believe that the craft was not of earthly origin. As seen in the facts described above, there is a lot of ambiguity surrounding The Battle of Los Angeles. It is this that dissociates narratives from the truth at hand, causing the public to become reliant on prominent narratives such as the occurrence of a Japanese attack or a U.F.O. sighting, opening the event up to speculation.

The rise of mid-century media brought with it an explosion of new science-fiction novels. Popularized through dime-store comics and thrilling radio broadcasts, the concept of alien invasions captured the attention of Americans as they dared to consider the terrifying possibility of life elsewhere secretly visiting Earth. However, many of these concepts began to breach past fiction and into the real world, as some began to speculate weird phenomena could be explained as malevolent aliens come to learn more about the human race. From Foo-Fighters<sup>4</sup> to the 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast<sup>5</sup>, the idea of alien invasion was conceptualized in real-world contexts more and more frequently. One primary example of this fiction flooding in with war-time fears of Japanese attack regarding The Battle of Los Angeles can be shown in how the craft was identified by many as “something like a giant butterfly”<sup>6</sup> in the Reno Gazette on the 26<sup>th</sup>. With regards to U.F.O. conspiracies, not only is this a highly irregular craft description but it also matches the common sketch of H.G. Well’s Flying Machines in *War of the Worlds* related media. Therefore, war time fears of Japanese attack might have triggered memories about past tales of invasion from a similarly malevolent but much more extraterrestrial source- *War of the Worlds*. In addition to this, Littleton’s now prevalent narrative regarding the observation of an alien space craft must be considered in the context of his prominent research focus: Ufology<sup>7</sup>- a subject which has remained intertwined with media related to science fiction for decades. While most believe Littleton’s interest in the U.F.O. phenomenon is due to his involvement with The Battle of Los Angeles, he must have read prolifically about alien spacecraft as a child to have identified it as alien in nature. With this in mind, the political climate at the time could have led Littleton to draw an illusory pattern between the popularized science fiction media he encountered growing up and the events of February 25<sup>th</sup>. With his account rising to become one of the most prominent narratives of the event, it is quite possible that this illusory connection sparked a chain reaction of other connections in the minds of citizens similarly primed towards a fear of alien invasion.

Following the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, The Battle of Los Angeles occurred during a time of great fear, paranoia, and military insecurity in the United States. After being caught completely off-guard by a surprise attack from the Japanese, Americans entered a “climate of

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<sup>4</sup> “Foo Fighters” was the term used by members of The United States Air Force to describe balls of light of unknown origin that would sometimes be reported flying alongside planes during the World Wars.

<sup>5</sup> Pooley, Jefferson “The Myth of the War of the World Panic” [Slate.com](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/10/orson_welles_war_of_the_worlds_panic_myth_the_infamous_radio_broadcast_did.html), October 28th 2013, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/10/orson\\_welles\\_war\\_of\\_the\\_worlds\\_panic\\_myth\\_the\\_infamous\\_radio\\_broadcast\\_did.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/10/orson_welles_war_of_the_worlds_panic_myth_the_infamous_radio_broadcast_did.html)

<sup>6</sup> Unlisted, “THE ‘ATTACK’ ON LOS ANGELES,” The Reno Evening Gazette, February 26th, 1942 via The Wanderling site, [http://the-wanderling.com/la\\_ufo.html](http://the-wanderling.com/la_ufo.html)

<sup>7</sup> The study of UFOs

fear” with “...profound fears about national security in the days after Pearl Harbor”<sup>8</sup>. This political climate facilitated a prominent feeling of control loss as only the now recently defeated United States military stood between citizens and an unpredictable wartime enemy. This sentiment of helplessness remained even stronger near the country’s west coast, as the new enemy lay just across the Pacific and only intensified with a series of small-scale coastal attacks. From a more individual perspective, the blackout procedure that occurred during the event placed citizens in a heightened state of vulnerability, as most simply must sit at home and hope no bombs are dropped in their vicinity- a fact that only facilitated the spread of this control-loss atmosphere. One must therefore consider The Battle of Los Angeles in its appropriate political environment, understanding how events of the time contributed to public sentiments. By doing so, one can see how American citizens of Los Angeles viewed the attack from a perspective of little control over anything that might occur. With fears regarding enemy attack and sentiments towards the rise of popularized alien novels fixating on similar invasion fears both present in the minds of west-coast American citizens at the time, this environment of panic and control loss predisposed many individuals to drawing an illusory correlation between topics of Japanese and alien invasion, producing a conspiracy that united both sentiments at the same time.

Jennifer Whitson and Adam Galinsky’s *Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception* is a study that conducts six experiments in which a participant is induced with a feeling of control loss and their perception of illusory correlations is observed. During each experiment, control is taken away from the participant by either implementing a concept identification paradigm, recalling a previous situation, or by analyzing trends while remaining dissociated from the occurrences. Therefore, the participant is left in a state of helplessness where they lack any control over a situation, much like the political environment that surrounded The Battle of Los Angeles. Each participant is then presented with a task and asked to identify how many patterns there are in various sets of information, when in fact no such patterns exist. The final test of the Whitson-Galinsky study was a correlational statistical analysis derived from the previous test’s collected data, and the analysis conducted showed that those with an induced loss of control had a higher mean of detecting illusory patterns and conspiracies than those with no induced helplessness. Based on their findings, Whitson and Galinsky concluded that their experiment “shows that a lack of control creates a need to perceive patterns in one’s environment, even when the patterns perceived are illusory”<sup>9</sup>. In the context of real-world illusory patterns, this study suggests that certain social atmospheres that induce feelings of control loss can lead to an increased potential for drawing patterns between two prominent yet unrelated claims as a way to compensate for said lack of command over a situation. This correlation between two unrelated subjects is then perceived as a single concept, and often takes the form of a conspiracy. Arguably, this could explain The Battle of Los Angeles’s modern-day U.F.O. consensus. As mentioned earlier, it was primarily believed that this event was yet another Japanese attack on the west coast, yet this claim eventually morphed into a conspiracy regarding alien encounters. With this in mind, one could see how an incorrect pattern could be drawn between the unknowing working of the Japanese Air Service and the mysterious alien invasions that pervaded science fiction during the time period.

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<sup>8</sup> (both quotes listed) Greene, Daniel, “How Pearl Harbor Created a Climate of Fear,” [CNN.com](https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/07/opinions/how-pearl-harbor-created-a-climate-of-fear-greene-opinion/index.html), Wednesday December 7th 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/07/opinions/how-pearl-harbor-created-a-climate-of-fear-greene-opinion/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> Whitson, Jennifer. “Lacking Control Increases Illusory Pattern Perception”. American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2008

With a prevalent narrative of alien visitation and mass-U.F.O. sightings, The Battle of Los Angeles's conspiracy can be explained by an illusory correlation drawn between fears of Japanese invasion and popularized science fiction of the time. Due to the event occurring during a political environment that facilitated sentiments of control loss in the American public, the spread of this illusory condition was predisposed, as suggested by Whitson and Galinsky's pattern perception research and the obscurity of most reports. By breaking down the popular narrative of this event and explaining why illogical conclusions were initially drawn in the historical context during which they occurred, hope can be had with regards to understanding other conspiracies. It is with this knowledge that the anatomy of the conspiracy theory can be better understood and the spread of false information corrected.