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# This Is Not Your Father's FBI

## *The X-Files and the Delegitimation of the Nation-State*

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PAUL A. CANTOR

I think *The X-Files* is very nineties, because everything is left in doubt. There's no closure, no answers. . . . Obviously it's tapping in to something the nation wants. I think it has to do with religious stirrings—a sort of New Age yearning for an alternate reality and the search for some kind of extrasensory god. Couple that with a cynical, jaded, dispossessed feeling of having been lied to by the government, and you've got a pretty powerful combination for a TV show. Either that, or the Fox network has an *amazing* marketing department.

—David Duchovny

Imagine a television program that takes UFOs and other extraterrestrial phenomena seriously. Moreover, it assumes not only that aliens have actually visited our planet, but also that the U.S. government is actively involved in a vast conspiracy to hide that fact from the American people in a plot that reaches up to the highest levels in the chain of command. The series goes on to link that cabal to other subjects beloved of conspiracy theorists—Watergate, for example, or the Kennedy and King

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assassinations. The series furthermore connects all these conspiracies to the international military-industrial complex and views the history of the United States since World War II as one huge exercise in militarism, beginning with a deal with its former Nazi enemies and including Nazi-like atrocities during the Vietnam War. With such a dark view of the U.S. government and its role in world politics, would such a series ever be permitted on the air by network TV executives? If programmed, could it possibly last a whole season? Would not the American public at some point wake up to the subversive character of the series and hoot it off the air?

I am of course not making up this series but simply describing the Fox Network's flagship program *The X-Files*. Contrary to all normal TV rules, a show with such a controversial view of U.S. history has been a solid success, completing seven seasons on the air and still going, receiving high ratings consistently, being widely syndicated in reruns already, and gathering fans all around the world as well as a cult following in America. The remarkable and unpredictable success of *The X-Files* has to tell us something about the United States in the 1990s; it has to reflect a fundamental shift of mood in the country.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the show did not reveal its deepest secrets all at once, and one might argue that it initially hooked its viewers with intriguing science-fiction plots and only gradually hit them with its shocking claims about the U.S. government. But even in its pilot episode, *The X-Files* was already suggesting that the federal government is hiding something, and the dominant mood of the show has always been distrust of authority. Though not inconceivable, it is difficult to believe that a show with such dark content could have achieved equivalent success in the 1970s or 1980s. Try to imagine a network in the 1970s casting James Garner as the hero in a series called *Jim Garrison: DA* or Mark Lane hosting a PBS series called *Great Performances: The Assassinations*.

The success of *The X-Files* in the 1990s would seem to reflect a growing cynicism in the American people about their government—a distrust of their leaders and a new disposition to believe the worst about them, no doubt fueled by the seemingly endless series of political scandals that emanated out of Washington in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Accounts of the genesis of the show reveal that when Fox executives were concerned about its political content, they were reassured by audience surveys:

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1. Of course, the success of *The X-Files* cannot simply be attributed to its ideological content. Efforts to duplicate the dark mood and conspiratorial atmosphere of the show in other series have generally failed. What other shows have not been able to duplicate is the *quality* of *The X-Files* as a television program. Few series in the history of television have equaled it in sheer production values. The producers try to achieve feature-film quality in each episode in all aspects of the show—the writing, the directing, the casting, the acting, the editing, the music, the lighting, the special effects, and so on—and they usually succeed. The show's popularity is therefore no fluke, a simple case of being at the ideological right place at the historically right time. And we must not underestimate the star power of David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson in the lead roles as a factor in the show's popularity. Many factors obviously go into the success of any television program. All I am claiming is that the controversial view of American politics *The X-Files* embodies has been one factor in its success, and therefore the show can serve as a measure of a change in political perceptions in the United States in the 1990s.

Strangely enough, little mention was made at first of the show's politics, considering that the pilot and subsequent hours begin with the premise that the government is behind widespread, covert activity to prevent the public from learning about the existence of UFOs. [Fox executive Sandy] Grushow does remember Jon Neswig, the head of Fox's sales department, raising the issue when the show was first screened, resulting in "some sparks flying in the room." Still, when Fox tested the show with what are called focus groups . . . to gauge viewer response, no one even questioned the notion. "The thing that was amazing to me in that test marketing was that, to a man, everyone believed that the government was conspiring" to cover things up, [*X-Files* creator Chris] Carter marvels. (Lowry 1995, 27)

*The X-Files* found a way to exploit this political disillusionment of the American people, tapping into their developing sense that their government does not have their best interest in mind. The fact that the show has been popular in many countries around the globe suggests that it may reflect even broader developments, a worldwide sense that politicians have failed to live up to their claims to be the saviors of humanity. But the political disillusionment goes even deeper. People do not just blame individual politicians for betraying their professed ideals; they have a more disturbing feeling that their political institutions themselves are failing them, and, above all, they have come increasingly to question whether their national governments can solve their problems. Indeed, some now believe that the nation-state is the problem, not the solution, interfering with the free play of global economic forces and thus reducing people's liberty and standard of living. Historians may someday look back at the 1990s as the decade in which the nation-state began to lose its legitimacy for a wide range of people. If so, they may view *The X-Files* as one of the primary cultural reflections of this development. The show took government conspiracy theories that had long been regarded as the lunatic fringe of political discourse in the United States and brought them into the mainstream. Indeed, it transformed ideas that for decades had been regarded as virtually paranoid into the weekly fare of television everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

One can see what an extraordinary development *The X-Files* represents in American popular culture by concentrating on the fact that, for all its science-fiction and horror elements, it is fundamentally a series about the FBI. As a TV advertiser might put it, however, this is not your father's FBI—and certainly not J. Edgar Hoover's. Far from being the hero of the series, as one might expect on American television, the federal agency is virtually the villain. Hoover actually appears in an episode called "Travelers" that goes back into FBI history, and he is portrayed in a very negative light as a rabid anticommunist, willing to go to any lengths to rid America of the Red

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2. Allison Graham does an excellent job of showing how ideas (in particular about the Kennedy assassination) that originally got comedian Mort Sahl labeled a "bona fide paranoiac" have become routinely embodied in *The X-Files* (1996, 52–53).

Menace. At one point, he says: “If we are to defeat the enemy, we must use their tools! . . . We must do those things which even our enemies would be ashamed to do.” One of the writers of the episode, Frank Spotnitz, reports:

We hired a retired FBI agent to serve as a technical advisor on the script. This was a gentleman who’d been with the Bureau for twenty or thirty years, and he was very offended by our script. He was angry that we would even suggest that J. Edgar Hoover—whom he still calls “Mr. Hoover”—would be involved in any of the plots, or take any of the positions that he takes in the script. Then he told me that he’d never actually seen our show. “But if this is the type of story that you’re telling,” he told me, “I can’t imagine that it would be very popular.” (Meisler 1999, 211)<sup>3</sup>

So much for the ability of retired FBI agents to read the mood of the United States in the 1990s. Active agents did not do much better. Chris Carter reports that he initially received very little help from the FBI when he sought background information for the show. It was only after *The X-Files* had become a hit that he started hearing from individual agents, some of whom arranged a tour of FBI headquarters in Washington for Carter and the show’s stars, David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson. Carter says that his relations with individual contacts in the FBI are better now: “I’ve been able to call and get good expert advice or information from these people. Still, officially, they can’t say they endorse the show or that they are in any way connected to the show” (qtd. in Edwards 1996, 79, 81). Given the way *The X-Files* portrays the FBI, the lack of official endorsement is hardly surprising.

To be sure, the individual FBI agents featured in the series, Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, are presented as heroic figures, but almost everything they accomplish they achieve in spite of the Bureau, not because of it. *The X-Files* presents the FBI as a vast government bureaucracy, with bewildering, byzantine, and even Kafkaesque layers of authority that make it impossible for Mulder and Scully to get clear guidance or support in their efforts to right the wrongs of the world. At times, *The X-Files* shows the FBI hindering Mulder’s and Scully’s work simply out of bureaucratic inertia, incompetence, and all-around thickheadedness. But as the series developed, it began to suggest that the opposition to Mulder and Scully is the product of sinister forces working within the FBI or at least exerting pressure on it from other branches of the federal government. We gradually learn that this agency, which more than any other over the

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3. “Travelers” concentrates on what it presents as the anticommunist paranoia of the Cold War in America, associating Hoover closely with Senator Joseph McCarthy and his aid Roy Cohn. Andy Meisler points out that the speech I quoted “was taken almost verbatim from a speech by Senator McCarthy” (1999, 211). Meisler reveals that the coauthors of the episode, John Shibana and Frank Spotnitz, were students at the American Film Institute of a screenwriter named Howard Dimsdale—a victim of Hollywood anticommunist blacklisting in the 1950s who wrote screenplays under the pseudonym Arthur Dales (the name given to an FBI agent in this episode). Shibana and Spotnitz (two of the most important figures in the creation of *The X-Files* over the years) conceived of this episode as a tribute to Dimsdale (who died in 1991).

years has represented the federal government's ability to uncover threats to its citizens, is being used as part of a plot to cover up the greatest threat the American people have ever faced—a worldwide conspiracy to aid aliens in taking over the earth.

In general, *The X-Files* is more likely to show the failures of the FBI than its successes. Indeed, in their very nature, the X-Files are tributes to the FBI's limitations—mysterious cases, chiefly involving paranormal phenomena, that the Bureau has failed to solve over the years. These files have become the special province of Fox Mulder, who is interested in any case involving mysterious or unexplained phenomena for a personal reason. He believes that years ago his younger sister was abducted by space aliens, and he seeks to find extraterrestrial causes behind paranormal events to validate his suspicions about his sister and to help him locate her, or at least to find out what happened to her. In the pilot episode, higher-ups in the FBI assign Dana Scully to Mulder as a partner in the hope that she will discredit his investigations. Her scientific expertise as a medical doctor is supposed to allow her to debunk his explanations of phenomena in terms of occult causes. If there are genuinely mysterious forces abroad in the world, evidently the FBI does not want to know about them—and it does not want anybody else to know about them either.

Thus, in its basic premise *The X-Files* suggests that the government is incapable of dealing with a whole side of human life. It hands the deepest mysteries over to a figure whom it proceeds actively to marginalize (symbolically, Mulder's office is in a basement corner of the FBI building in the District of Columbia).<sup>4</sup> It does everything it can to thwart his efforts to uncover the truth and, if he ever does, to prevent him from making it known to the public. The show in fact emphasizes that the government does not represent the public interest but has a hidden agenda that largely reflects the self-interest of those in power. All this runs counter to the way the FBI has traditionally been presented in American popular culture.<sup>5</sup> Probably no branch of the federal government has gotten more of a free ride from the mass media than the FBI. Bureau agents have been the darlings of movies, radio, and television throughout their history and were especially so in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. The notion of a federal police force was originally very controversial—many regarded it as an unjustified extension of the federal government's power, beyond what is specified in the Constitution—but we seldom get even a hint of such controversy in media representations of the FBI. In perhaps the most celebratory treatment Hollywood ever produced—a movie called *The FBI Story* (1959)—the question of why a *federal* bureau of investigation is necessary comes up briefly, but the answer is almost comic in its simplicity: "The country's growing, and crime will grow with it." This response makes the FBI sound like a franchise operation on the model of McDonald's—"over one bil-

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4. In his famous characterization of himself in the first episode, Mulder says: "Nobody down here but the FBI's most unwanted." On this point, see Kubek 1996, 172.

5. For a brief but very helpful survey of the representation of the FBI in movies and television, see Malach 1996, 63–76. For a systematic discussion of the subject, see Powers 1983.

lion criminals captured”—but it completely begs the constitutional question and leaves us wondering why local police forces are not adequate for dealing with the problem of crime, no matter how much it may be growing. Supporters of the FBI would of course answer that the agency was needed to deal with new developments in crime that local police forces were incapable of handling, such as criminals crossing state lines in speedy automobiles. Opponents would counter that much of the “growth in crime” was actually the result of the federal government’s outlawing of innocent activities or at least of “victimless crimes,” as it did during Prohibition.

These legal and political issues are admittedly complex, and people may legitimately disagree about them, but the point is that none of these arguments are vetted in *The FBI Story*. The FBI was heavily involved in the film and supervised all aspects of its production.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the film comes across as outright propaganda for the FBI. *The FBI Story* stresses that the agency, at least under Hoover’s reign, is above politics; that its agents are God-fearing, self-sacrificing public servants, willing to give their lives to protect their country and their families; that it is technologically sophisticated and able to ferret out any criminal; and, above all, that, in Superman-like fashion, it is on the side of truth, justice, and the American way.

*The FBI Story* may be extreme in its blanket endorsement of J. Edgar Hoover and the agency he ran for decades, but it is representative of the general tendency of Hollywood and other elements of American popular culture to take a positive view of the FBI (with some notable exceptions, especially during the Vietnam and Watergate era).<sup>7</sup> Hoover himself was quite aware of the importance of public perception of the FBI and was very canny about cultivating its public image. For decades, popular culture worked to make Americans proud of their FBI, persuading them to view it as a symbol of the integrity of their government. The FBI was portrayed as policing the borders of America in every sense of the term, protecting it against a wide range of enemies, foreign and domestic. During World War II, it countered the sabotage and espionage efforts of German and Japanese agents working in the United States. During the Cold War, FBI surveillance was extended to agents from the Soviet Union and other communist nations. Many FBI stories have dealt with attempts to violate U.S. borders—through smuggling operations, for example, and especially through attempts to sneak illegal aliens into the country. The FBI has been shown fighting domestic terrorism and, in particular, working to thwart assassination attempts on public figures such as the president. Many movie and television FBI dramas deal with the FBI’s war

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6. According to the film’s director, Mervyn LeRoy, Hoover “and his men controlled the movie. . . . Everybody on that picture, from the carpenters and electricians right to the top, everybody, had to be okayed by the F.B.I. . . . I had two F.B.I. men with me all the time, for research purposes, so that we did things right” (qtd. in Powers 1983, 242). In general, Powers’s book shows the remarkable degree of control Hoover exerted over Hollywood representations of the FBI.

7. For an excellent discussion of the turn against the FBI in popular culture in the 1970s, see Malach 1996, 67–68.

on organized crime, pictured as a national syndicate that is the mirror image of the Bureau's own national organization.<sup>8</sup> In its efforts to eliminate gangsters, the FBI was shown going after bootleggers and rumrunners during Prohibition, and, more recently, has been shown targeting drug dealers.

The various functions of the FBI sometimes link up. For example, gangsters are often shown to come from specific immigrant groups, sometimes living in the United States illegally. Occasionally this tendency has gone too far. The FBI television show *The Untouchables*, for example, came under fire for always portraying its villains as Italian-Americans. But such ethnic stereotyping in some ways goes to the heart of the typical Hollywood FBI story. Portraying the FBI often turns into an exercise in defining what is American by defining what is un-American. The FBI agent is himself frequently the very image of the all-American hero; Jimmy Stewart, for example, plays the lead in *The FBI Story*. The FBI hero is set against a variety of villains who all in some way challenge the mainstream conception of the American way of life. In *The FBI Story*, for example, when the Bureau is trying to track down a Soviet spy on a Sunday, the Jimmy Stewart character remarks: "Since he was a communist, we knew he couldn't be going to church." The film reduces the ideological conflict to the simplest possible terms—Americans believe in God and Soviet communists do not. As epitomized by its efforts at policing national borders, the fundamental role of the FBI seems to be to draw a sharp line between America and everything that is not America. In one subgenre of the FBI drama, the Bureau takes on the subversive activities of counterfeiters and thereby works to ensure the integrity of U.S. currency. The federal government gets to define what counts as money in America, and the FBI's job is to make sure that no private individuals get in on the act. Protecting the symbols as well as the realities of national sovereignty is the noble mission of the FBI in traditional representations in the media.

*The X-Files* works to deconstruct this myth in its portrayal of the FBI. Instead of the clear-cut oppositions of the classic American FBI drama, it serves up a murky twilight world in which it is difficult, if not impossible, to tell the good guys from the bad guys. With double, triple, and sometimes quadruple agents at work, *The X-Files* always keeps its audience guessing who is working for America and who against it, or, for that matter, whether the U.S. government is on the side of right or wrong. Far from presenting neat distinctions between the United States and its enemies, the central plotline of *The X-Files* suggests that at various times U.S. authorities have been in

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8. Robert Lacey makes the interesting observation that our sense of how organized "organized crime" is may be colored by the lens through which we view it. Because federal bureaucracies generally supply us with information about the Mafia, the crime syndicate may end up looking more bureaucratic than it really is: "The FBI and other law enforcement agencies . . . [set] out their criminal intelligence data on huge organization charts. . . . These charts had the virtue of demonstrating, in graphic and human terms, the pool of criminal activity in any major city. But they reflected the bureaucratic and semimilitary cast of thought prevailing in the average police office. Everybody had a rank, and they did little justice to the confused, fluid, and essentially entrepreneurial character of most criminal activity" (1991, 293).



collusion with Nazi scientists or linked up with covert Soviet operations. Rather than showing the FBI protecting American public figures against assassins, *The X-Files* in one particularly dark episode (“Musings of a Cigarette-Smoking Man”) half seriously suggests that a figure closely linked to the agency may have been responsible for killing John Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. Mulder and Scully are of course consistently presented as heroes and in that sense as good guys, but even they sometimes appear as morally ambiguous, at least in each other’s eyes. A number of the *X-Files* plots work to give Mulder and Scully reasons to be suspicious of each other and to set them at cross-purposes, sometimes because weird circumstances contrive to produce an exact double of one or the other, who functions as a kind of evil twin.<sup>9</sup> This kind of doubling is perfectly characteristic of *The X-Files*, whose central mode is duplicity. Where the classic FBI drama gives us moral and political clarity, *The X-Files* time and again delivers ambiguity, thereby reflecting a loss of faith in the national government that the Bureau represents.

A typical and not particularly distinguished *X-Files* episode from the fifth season, “The Pine Bluff Variant,” illustrates these points. At the beginning of the episode, Mulder is acting very suspiciously. Participating in the surveillance of an FBI suspect, he has evidently helped him escape. His actions are so odd that Scully begins to doubt his loyalty and starts tailing him to find out what he is up to. It turns out that Mulder’s apparent treachery is actually part of a plot for him to infiltrate a domestic terrorist operation. By helping the suspect escape, he is trying to get in the good graces of an organization called the New Spartans, portrayed as a stereotypical right-wing militia group that has “the expressed goal of overthrowing the federal government.” To further their ends, the New Spartans seem to be pursuing a course of bioterrorism, using some kind of genetically engineered weapon said to be derived from the secret laboratories of the former Soviet Union. Their plan appears to strike at the very heart of U.S. sovereignty; in his undercover role, Mulder learns that the New Spartans are going to use the cover of robbing a bank (aptly named the First Sovereign Bank of Pennsylvania) to contaminate the U.S. money supply with their bioweapon (specifically, they are going to spray a Federal Reserve shipment of banknotes with a flesh-eating microbe). “The Pine Bluff Variant” thus seems to offer a veritable compendium of the elements of a standard FBI drama: domestic terrorists, with a sinister connection to a foreign enemy, challenging the authority of the federal government and developing a plan for attacking the integrity of the U.S. currency.

Up to this point, the plot of “The Pine Bluff Variant” is convoluted enough, leaving even Scully bewildered when she is pulled over on the road by armed men: “Exactly what agency are you guys from?” But the episode has one last plot twist for its viewers. It seems to be telling a predictable story of a right-wing conspiracy against

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9. For example, doubles of Mulder appear in “Small Potatoes” and the “Dreamland” episodes, though in these cases the doubling is played largely for comic effect. In “The Pine Bluff Variant,” Scully has serious reasons for becoming suspicious of Mulder’s behavior, and in “Wetwired” Mulder has serious reasons for becoming suspicious of Scully’s.

the federal government. In general, *The X-Files* presents right-wing conspiracies more negatively than it does left-wing conspiracies. In fact, I cannot think of a single case where it presents anything that could be described as a left-wing conspiracy. With its generally left-wing political sympathies, *The X-Files* tends to regard all conspiracies as right-wing, including of course the military-industrial conspiracy at the center of its main plot.<sup>10</sup> But for all the negative stereotyping of the right-wing militia figures in “The Pine Bluff Variant” (one of them is a skinhead), it turns out that the federal government—or at least an element within it—is the real villain of the episode. We find out at the end that the U.S. attorney working with the FBI to uncover the terrorist plot has known about it all along and seems to have participated in it and perhaps even planned and authorized it.

Earlier in the episode, when Scully wonders if the killer microbe could have been “developed by the Russians,” a doctor from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tells her: “I’ve seen everything in the Russian arsenal; they’ve got nothing this sophisticated.” When Scully tells her stalwart boss, Assistant FBI Director Walter Skinner, that the weapon must have been “developed domestically,” he toes the official line: “The United States has no bioweapons. President Nixon dismantled our program in 1969.” The mention of Nixon is of course not exactly calculated to convince the audience of the federal government’s integrity, and Scully goes on to contradict her superior: “Yes, sir, that’s what we’ve been told,” but “the bioweapons program may have continued in secret.” Blurring the line between America and its enemies, ultimately the episode invites us to think of the U.S. military as perhaps more sinister than the Russian. It makes Mulder’s earlier remark to the New Spartans sound prophetic: “The only reason I tolerate your methods is that the government’s are worse.”

Even by the normal standards of *X-Files* murkiness, this episode leaves it unclear why a federal official would be involved in a plot to contaminate the money supply. But *The X-Files* constantly shows shadowy government figures experimenting on an unsuspecting American public—in particular, trying out various toxins on them. In the climactic confrontation, the U.S. attorney rebukes Mulder: “Our government is not in the business of killing innocent civilians,” but the FBI agent insists: “Those were tests on us, to be used on someone else.” By the end of “The Pine Bluff Variant,” the char-

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10. The political bent of *The X-Files* is a complicated and much debated subject, to which this essay is meant to make a contribution by showing that the sympathy for left-wing causes in the show does not tell the whole story. Lowry reports: “A conservative newsletter published by the Media Research Center not long ago put *The X-Files* on its top 10 list of programs with a perceived liberal bias, citing its ‘proffered conspiracy theories alleging outrageous government atrocities’” (1995, 27). But in the 1990s, “outrageous government atrocities” became a theme of the right as well as the left (Waco, Ruby Ridge, and so on). Lowry goes on to say of the Media Research Center claim: “Carter is amused by that charge, pointing to what some feel is an inherently conservative bent to the slogan (and Mulder’s computer log-on) ‘TrustNo1,’ which is really saying in effect to be wary of government. ‘It’s really more libertarian,’ he says. ‘Conservatives say, ‘Trust us.’ This is really saying, ‘Don’t trust anyone.’ That summarizes my political views in a nutshell.” As Carter’s remarks suggest, in general the issue of the end of the nation-state cuts across normal left/right political distinctions.

acters appear to have switched sides so often that our ability to tell the good guys from the bad guys has been completely eroded. We are left thoroughly confused and tempted to agree with Mulder when he himself says of the plot as it is unfolding: “It doesn’t make sense.” The only thing that is clear is that *The X-Files* has chosen to invert the normal pattern of the FBI drama. In a plot twist that should endear the show to monetarists everywhere, here the federal government and perhaps the Federal Reserve itself are shown tampering with the money supply—not the private individuals vilified in the standard counterfeiting storyline. In his last words to the U.S. attorney, Mulder insists: “The money’s as dirty as you are.” Sticking to his guns, the federal official asks Mulder which side he is on, demanding to know if he wants “to bring down the federal government—to do the very work that that group you were part of is so bent on doing. What do you want—laws against these men or laws protecting them?” Mulder’s reply goes to the heart of *The X-Files*: “I want people to know the truth.” And the official’s answer shows where the battles lines are drawn on the show: “Well, sometimes our job is to protect those people from knowing it.” That the federal government might have an interest in concealing the truth from the American people goes against everything that FBI dramas have traditionally tried to show.

As damaging as the serious criticism of the federal government in *The X-Files* may be, in a way the show’s comic episodes can be even more corrosive. In perhaps the funniest of all episodes, “Jose Chung’s *From Outer Space*,” a science-fiction writer concocts fictionalized versions of Mulder and Scully, and ultimately passes a damning judgment on the latter: “Seeking the truth about aliens means a perfunctory 9 to 5 job to some, for although Agent Diana Lesky is noble of spirit and pure at heart, she remains nevertheless a federal employee.”<sup>11</sup> Rarely have the words *federal employee* been delivered with such ringing contempt on American television. *The X-Files* is just as likely to treat the national government with derision as with suspicion. Sometimes it shows all-powerful shadowy forces running Americans’ lives with sophisticated methods of surveillance and mind control. At the other times, however, the show delights in portraying federal officials as inept, bumbling, and hence easily outwitted by private citizens, who display more intelligence and initiative.

Perhaps the most damaging revelation *The X-Files* has to make about the federal government, however, is its growing irrelevance in the lives of its citizens. The show reveals Americans more and more being shaped by local and global forces in their world, with the nation-state consequently caught in a squeeze, increasingly pushed out of its seemingly central role in American life and relegated to the margins. Though photographs of the president and the attorney general routinely grace the FBI offices in the series, that is all they are—mere pictures. *The X-Files* strongly suggests that our public officials are just figureheads, manipulated from behind the scenes by mysterious

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11. A similar moment occurs in “Humbug,” when a character says to Mulder: “I’ve taken in your all-American features, your dour demeanor, your unimaginative necktie design, and concluded that you work for the government. . . . an FBI agent.” “Humbug” was written by Darin Morgan, the same man who wrote “Jose Chung’s *From Outer Space*.”

power brokers. It is remarkable how small a role prominent officials such as the president or central institutions such as Congress have to play in *The X-Files*. It is obscure government agencies that have the real power, such as the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), which, according to one conspiracy theorist in the *X-Files* movie, forms “the secret government” of the United States and will take over openly once the planned alien invasion finally begins. Arguably the most extraordinary message *The X-Files* has for its audience is that the public figures they see in Washington, who seem to represent the nation-state in all its flag-waving glory, are in fact inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. According to *The X-Files*, it is people whose faces we do not know who in effect govern our lives, and they do not do so in the name of the nation-state. In “Musings of a Cigarette-Smoking Man,” the dark villain tells one of his coconspirators: “How many historic events have only the two of us witnessed together? How often did we make or change history? And our names can never grace any pages of record. No monument can bear our image. And yet once again, tonight, the course of history will be set by two unknown men—standing in the shadows.” History made by unknown men standing in the shadows—that is the governing vision of *The X-Files* and its ultimate subversion of the ideology of the nation-state.

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