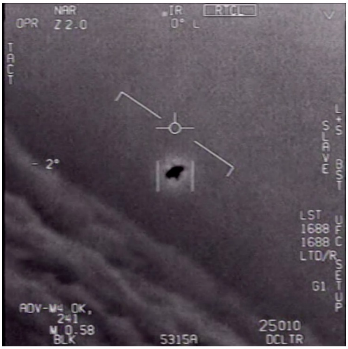
SPACE & PHYSICS

Experts Weigh In on Pentagon UFO Report

The vast majority of examined incidents were not caused by U.S. advanced technology programs, the forthcoming report concludes. So what's going on?

By Leonard David on June 8, 2021



Still from a video released by the U.S. Department of Defense showing an encounter between a Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet and an unknown object. Credit: U.S. Department of Defense; *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

For more than a decade, the U.S. Department of Defense has been quietly cataloging and investigating scores of bizarre encounters—most from the U.S. Navy—of ships and fighter jets tangling with, or being tailgated by, unidentified flying objects (UFOs). Beginning in 2017, videos and eyewitness accounts of these weird sightings found their way into public view, ultimately spurring Congress to demand that the Pentagon produce a report summarizing all that the U.S. government knows about so-called unidentified aerial phenomena, or UAP (an alternate term with considerably less stigma than the much maligned "UFOs").

Produced under the auspices of a Pentagon group called the UAP Task Force, an unclassified version of the report is expected to be released later this month. Upon establishing the task force, the DOD released an accompanying statement explaining the justifications for its existence: "The safety of our personnel and the security of our operations are of paramount concern. The Department of Defense and the military departments take any incursions by unauthorized aircraft into our training ranges or designated airspace very seriously and examine each report. This includes examinations of incursions that are initially reported as UAP when the observer cannot immediately identify what he or she is observing."

ASSESSING THE "ALIEN" HYPOTHESIS

Meanwhile all this strangeness has garnered considerable media attention, from front-page stories in the *New York Times* to 13,000-word articles in the *New Yorker,* as well as prominent coverage on *60 Minutes* and other prime-time television programs. Through it all, a sizable contingent of true believers have steadily proclaimed, "We told you so," insistent in their conviction that, whether called UFOs or UAP, the entities seemingly slipping through our skies are actually alien spacecraft—and have been visiting Earth for a very long time.

Those deeply entrenched public beliefs, paired with the apparent reinvigoration of investigative interest in these incidents at the highest levels of government, can lead to dazzling speculations. Might we be on the verge of a formal disclosure—backed by irrefutable evidence—that humankind is not alone and is indeed being monitored by extraterrestrial civilizations? Or could it be that UAP are entirely homegrown products of revolutionary and clandestine technological advances, whether by other countries now challenging American airspace or by the U.S. itself as part of some supersecret domestic program meant to detect flaws in the nation's defenses? The mind boggles.

Although the task force's unclassified assessment is not expected until June 25, the *New York Times* provided a cursory preview of its contents in an article on June 3. Citing anonymous senior officials familiar with the report's contents, the story said that the assessment has come up short of explaining what UAP are and that it provides no evidence to link them with any putative alien visitation—despite reviewing more than 120 incidents from the past 20 years. The report's firmest conclusion, it seems, is that the vast majority of UAP happenings and their surprising maneuvers are not caused by any U.S. advanced technology programs.

Lastly, according to the *New York Times* article, the final report includes a "classified annex" of information deemed unsuitable for public release—leaving more than enough room for die-hard UFO advocates to remain convinced that the U.S. government is hiding the truth.

NO "BIG REVEAL"

Andrew Fraknoi, an astronomer at the Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning at the University of San Francisco, echoes the widely held sentiment among scientists that, for decades, the media has lavished too much attention on sensational claims that vague lights in the sky are actually extraterrestrial spacecraft. "Recently, there has been a flurry of misleading publicity about UFOs [based on military reports]. A sober examination of these claims reveals that there is a lot *less* to them than first meets the eye," Fraknoi says. Given sufficient evidence (which, arguably, many of the recent reports fail to provide), UFO sightings can essentially always be tied to terrestrial or celestial phenomena, such as lights from human-made vehicles and reentering space junk, he adds.

There is not going to be any "big reveal," says Robert Sheaffer, a leading skeptical investigator of UFOs. “There are no aliens here on Earth, and so the government cannot ‘disclose’ what it does not have. Some people think that the government knows more about UFOs, or UAP, than the public, but it’s clear that they know less on the subject than our best civilian UFO investigators, not more.”

The DOD employs some very competent photographic analysts and other technical experts, “none of whom obviously were consulted in this comedy of errors,” Sheaffer says. “The Pentagon has already suffered enough embarrassment from the [apparent] incompetence of its UAP Task Force.” He says it is time to rein in such “rampant foolishness” and ensure that proper experts will shape the task force’s conclusions rather than “clueless, self-important people who don’t even recognize out-of-focus images when they see them.”

REAL ISSUES

Skeptical science writer Mick West has taken on the chore of analyzing the spate of UAP videos released by the U.S. military, steadfastly investigating how some of the incidents could merely be mirages from flaws in newly deployed radar systems, as well as various sorts of well-understood visual artifacts regularly seen in cameras. Despite his work to debunk the recent claims, West maintains that reports of mysterious aircraft stalking military assets should be taken quite seriously.

“Firstly, there’s a set of very real issues that could be grouped together as ‘UAPs’ or ‘UFOs,’” West says. “Any time something unidentified shows up in restricted airspace, then that’s a real problem that needs solving.” There have been many reports of drones above or near restricted areas, he notes. “We know that drones have been used for terrorist attacks, and drones will very much be a significant factor in future conflicts,” West says. “So we need to figure out how to identify and mitigate such things.”

Another real issue is that pilots sometimes see things that they cannot readily identify, West says, and they may misidentify such objects. Regardless of what such pilots actually observe, this is a problem. “If something there is hard to identify—like a novel drone—then we need to figure out how to identify it,” he says. “If the pilots are making mistakes, then we need to figure out why.”

THE “DISCLOSURE” FEEDBACK LOOP

“The advocates of alien disclosure are encroaching on these real issues of UAPs,” West says. These believers take mundane videos of incidents that are simply unidentified, he says, then reframe them as evidence of extraordinary technology—which, of course, is intended to mean “aliens,” even if enthusiasts for that hypothesis will not explicitly say so. This cultivates credulous media attention, which in turn creates a feedback loop of public interest, more media and then pressure on politicians to “do something.”

“All the while, the military makes no comments, because that’s their modus operandi. Military things are assumed classified by default, and there is nothing compelling them to clear things up,” West says. In the end, he hopes that the forthcoming report represents the views of serious people finally stepping in to clear up what is—and is *not*—going on.

“I expect much discussion and information about the real issues of unidentified flying objects. But I do not anticipate it will have much that will please the UFO enthusiasts,” West says.

WAIT AND SEE

One person who is taking a “wait and see” attitude about the upcoming report is Ravi Kumar Kopparapu, a research scientist in planetary studies at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center. The history of scientific studies of UAP in the U.S. is not limited to the recently released video snippets, which is a good reminder to avoid painting the whole phenomenon with one broad brush, he says. Additionally, this is not a U.S.-specific issue, nor is it limited to observations by U.S. armed forces.

“There may not be a single explanation to all such observations. What I would suggest is that we not leap to any conclusions when the findings of the report are made public,” Kopparapu says. “The report would be immensely helpful if the data that informed it are made publicly available so that more experts and scientists can look at it and hopefully reach a scientific consensus on the nature of some of the unexplained events. Otherwise, there will always be conspiracy theories shrouding, and inhibiting, a proper scientific investigation of UAPs.”

A similar view is held by Mark Rodeghier, scientific director of the Center for UFO Studies, who says openness should be prioritized as much as possible in future investigations. “We don’t know whether the UFO problem is an intelligence one, due to foreign adversaries, but we do know, from its long history, that it is absolutely a scientific problem that deserves serious attention,” he says. “In a subject that has been too long ignored, downplayed and ridiculed, the government and scientific community should study UFOs openly and, importantly, with an open mind.”

WANTED: SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY

Harvard University astrophysicist Avi Loeb says the significance of the UAP Task Force report will depend on the evidence it discloses, which at the moment remains mostly unknown. “But this focus on past reports is misguided,” he says. “It would be prudent to progress forward with our finest instruments rather than examine past reports. Instead of focusing on documents that reflect decades-old technologies used by witnesses with no scientific expertise, it would be far better to deploy state-of-the-art recording devices, such as cameras or audio sensors, at the sites where the reports came from and search for unusual signals.”

Loeb goes a step further, saying he is willing to sign up to help unravel the UAP/UFO saga. “Personally, I will be glad to lead scientific inquiry into the nature of these reports and advise Congress accordingly,” he says. “This could take the form of a federally designated committee or a privately funded expedition. Its most important purpose would be to inject scientific rigor and credibility into the discussion.”

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

For some seasoned investigators, such as William Hartmann, a senior scientist emeritus at the Planetary Science Institute, headquartered in Tucson, Ariz., the current dustup over an influential government report on UFOs is a reminder that, eventually, everything old becomes new again.

Hartmann was a photography consultant and a co-author of the University of Colorado UFO Project’s report *Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects*. Funded by the U.S. Air Force from 1966 to 1968, that investigative effort was led by physicist Edward Condon, and it had dismal effects on subsequent scientific investigations. The extensive study of UFOs, Condon and his co-authors concluded, is simply not a fruitful field in which to seek major discoveries and “probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby.”

Reflecting on his work for the project, also called the Condon committee, Hartmann says that none of the photographic evidence he examined could establish anything extraordinary about the observed phenomena. “We proved that some of [the cases], including classic photos still being trotted out, were fake,” he says. “That fact alone makes it extremely difficult to apply straight scientific techniques because we know some, not necessarily all, of the data we were given were carefully prepared to delude us. [That is] not quite like astronomy, where we can assume that the photons coming through our telescope atop Mauna Kea in Hawaii are not put in there by a hoaxer.”

“To put it another way, if you think there could be a real alien spaceship among a pile of photos you are given, but you know that some of the photos are fakes, then it is very hard to prove that any single one of them is proof of an alien visitation,” Hartmann says. “I’d want to see multiple, clear photos or detections by witnesses who don’t know each other, from multiple cities, viewing from multiple directions, before getting very excited.”

Still, he adds that ever since his experience working on the Condon committee, he cannot escape "the feeling that there may be electromagnetic phenomena in the atmosphere that we still don't understand."

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

Sarah Scoles is author of the recently published book *They Are Already Here: UFO Culture and Why We See Saucers*. Although the report's full details remain to be seen, she senses it will not be as revelatory as some hope.

"At various times during the 20th century, the military has undertaken studies of UFOs to determine, largely, whether what people are seeing represents a national security threat," Scoles says. "This report doesn't, then, seem seminal, because it's doing a 21st-century version of that same thing."

That said, Scoles feels an unbiased analysis of available data could shed light on the true frequency of UAP observations—and perhaps on the characteristics and possibly identities of these sightings. "One problem with UFO/UAP research is that it often doesn't resemble traditional scientific research in terms of rigor," she says.

The task force report could quantify and analyze a wide swath of data, Scoles hopes, with the requisite background knowledge of sensor capabilities, current domestic and foreign military capabilities, and so on. If so, that would be a welcome change from previous high-profile studies, she concludes.

Where does this leave us? The truth, of course, is somewhere out there, whether or not it appears in the pages of the UAP Task Force report. But for now, the odds seem to be against the U.S. government knowing what it is, let alone revealing it anytime soon.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Leonard David is author of *Moon Rush: The New Space Race* (National Geographic, 2019) and *Mars: Our Future on the Red Planet* (National Geographic, 2016). He has been reporting on the space industry for more than five decades. *Credit: Nick Higgins*

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