DAILY COMMENT

THE UNEXPLAINED PHENOMENA OF THE U.F.O. REPORT

A new intelligence document examines a hundred and forty-three sightings that might have been caused by errant balloons, foreign drones, or "Other"—a reserved way of saying aliens.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

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A brief provision accompanying the 2021 Intelligence Authorization Act, which was signed last December, called on the Director of National Intelligence, in consultation with the Secretary of Defense and the heads of various pertinent agencies, to produce an "intelligence assessment of the threat posed by UAP and the progress the UAPTF has made to understand this threat." U.A.P., or "unidentified aerial phenomena," is the revamped initialism for the perennial enigmas previously known as "U.F.O.s"; the U.A.P.T.F. is a task force that was established to investigate them. The formal announcement of the task force, last August, marked an inflection point in the arc of renewed official interest in the topic. An initial phase of government attention—running from 2007, when Harry Reid was persuaded to set aside twenty-two million dollars of "black money" appropriations for the study of U.F.O.s, through the end of 2017, when reporters for the *Times* revealed the existence of the secretive program—could be conceivably written off as the self-indulgent work of a small cadre of U.F.O. hobbyists who happened to be in the right place at the right time. The task force's report, however, would have the imprimatur of the intelligence community, and its very existence was hard to square with charges of hobbyism. The report was expected in the afternoon on Friday, seventy-four years, almost to the day, since a mysterious sighting near Mt. Rainier inaugurated the modern U.F.O. era. As the afternoon progressed without an announcement, U.F.O. enthusiasts speculated that the findings were subject to deliberate delay, lest they rattle the markets. The Director of National Intelligence's office finally released the unclassified portion of the report just after the close of the business day. Its Web site did not seem to be designed to handle the kind of traffic that U.F.O. news generates, and repeated attempts to download the file met only error messages.

Believers and skeptics hoped for a climactic resolution, one way or the other, to the country's extended love-hate relationship with flying saucers. But prevailing

expectations were low. Assessments of this kind have come and gone before—the British government compiled its own version two decades ago—and the situation has remained perplexing. This particular report was not, by all accounts, being assembled under the most auspicious circumstances: two people, reportedly working part time, had been given only a hundred and eighty days to determine what, exactly, the federal government did and did not know about U.F.O.s.

The initial reaction to the Preliminary Assessment, on U.F.O. Twitter and elsewhere, was one of resignation. The report had not failed to disappoint almost everyone. As the first line of the executive summary put it, "The limited amount of high-quality reporting on unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) hampers our ability to draw firm conclusions about the nature or intent of UAP." More data and more resources were needed. Members of Congress, who had been briefed in recent days on the classified version of the report, called for further study. Marco Rubio, the Republican senator from Florida, issued a statement that said, "This report is an important first step in cataloging these incidents, but it is just a first step. The Defense Department and Intelligence Community have a lot of work to do before we can actually understand whether these aerial threats present a serious national security concern." A statement from Adam Schiff, the Democratic congressman from California who heads the House Intelligence Committee, concurred: "We should approach these questions without preconceptions to encourage a thorough, systematized analysis of the potential national security and flight safety risks posed by unidentified aerial phenomena, whether they are the result of a foreign adversary, atmospheric or other aerial phenomena, space debris, or something else entirely." André Carson, a Democrat from Indiana also on the committee, has already brooked the possibility of a public hearing on the subject, something that last happened in 1966, at the behest of Gerald Ford, then the House Minority Leader. Apparently, the only matter left upon which Democrats and Republicans could agree was the need to keep studying U.F.O.s.

The ultimate recommendation may have been banal, but the document itself, while clinical and reserved, was altogether stranger. Under scrutiny were a total of a hundred and forty-four sightings, all of them taken from military aviators or other "reliable" government sources and systems. The earliest incident dated to 2004—almost certainly the "Nimitz encounter," in which multiple Navy pilots saw a Tic-Tac-shaped object flying off the coast of Baja California. But the majority of the cases had occurred in only the last two years, since the Navy updated the standard reporting mechanism for U.A.P.s. (The Air Force followed suit, last November, with a pilot program for spooked pilots.) Of this total, only one case could be conclusively explained away, as a "large, deflating balloon." The remaining reports included eighty that "involved observation with multiple sensors," i.e., some combination of eyewitness testimony, radar returns, infrared indications, or other electro-optical sources. Even more strangely, eighteen of the incidents involved "unusual UAP movement patterns or flight characteristics"—the varieties of inexplicable maneuverability that have distinguished U.F.O. sightings for decades. It remained unclear whether these made up a subset of those caught by multiple sensors or if all of these more dramatic cases were uncorroborated eyewitness accounts. "Some UAP appeared to remain stationary in winds aloft, move against the wind, maneuver abruptly, or move at considerable speed, without discernable [sic] means of propulsion," the report said. In a "small number of these," American aircraft processed radio-frequency energy coming from the devices, which could be a sign of radar jamming, and there seemed to be "a degree of signature management"—the use of stealth technologies to mask the U.F.O.'s presence. Perhaps no embalmed aliens had been found in a sub-basement at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, as believers have long speculated, but these findings were hardly trivial.

This year, I spent several months reporting a piece about the long career of the U.F.O. taboo in America. When I related to friends or colleagues what I'd come to learn—that a phenomenon I'd once written off as chimerical fancy was, in fact, not

particularly straightforward—I was often asked if I now "believed in U.F.O.s." Of course, if one delimits the term "U.F.O." in the strictest way possible—as something odd in the sky that cannot, despite best expert efforts, be positively classified—then the existence of U.F.O.s is unquestionable, if largely uninteresting. What they were really asking, perhaps needless to say, was whether I believed that we had been visited by alien spaceships. In recent days, this sensational conviction has been explicitly articulated by interested parties who might previously have identified as agnostics. Christopher K. Mellon, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, who has done perhaps more than anyone to revive the issue in Washington, wrote a widely circulated blog post this week called "Don't Dismiss the Alien Hypothesis." Luis Elizondo, who ran the secret Pentagon program from 2010 through his resignation in 2017, told a Canadian podcaster that if the public had access to all of the classified information, the mood would be "sombre"; some people, he added, would turn to religion for consolation. It's true that the extraterrestrial hypothesis can't be peremptorily eliminated, but, based on known evidence, it certainly can't be proved, either. It's not a falsifiable claim but an article of faith. One way to interpret "Do you believe in U.F.O.s?" as a serious question might be, "Do you believe that unidentified flying objects—the five per cent or so of historical cases that have evaded prosaic resolution—represent a meaningful category of unexplained thing?"

This is perhaps the only question in the report for which a definitive answer is given. One section heading, set in bold and underlined, reads, "UAP PROBABLY LACK A SINGLE EXPLANATION." In other words, no, the government does not maintain that the "unexplained" represents a coherent bracket. The authors outline five subcategories, each of which might plausibly explain some proportion of the incidents. Three of them are fairly straightforward: the U.F.O.s could be our own secret aircraft ("USG or Industry Developmental Programs"); they could be terrestrial antagonists ("Foreign Adversary Systems"); or they could be weather ("Natural Atmospheric Phenomena"). The final two categories are less rigorously defined: the objects could be "Airborne Clutter," a grouping roomy enough to

accommodate drones, balloons, plastic bags, other floating garbage, and birds; or, of course, they could be "Other," the refined way to say "alien spaceships."

The report itemizes these options only to dispense with the bulk of them. As far as our own aircraft are concerned, the authors of the report write, "Some UAP observations could be attributable to developments and classified programs by U.S. entities. We were unable to confirm, however, that these systems accounted for any of the UAP reports we collected." The formulation leaves open the prospect that there are classified programs of which the members of the task force remained unaware. But this report was produced not by some bloodshot-eyed drifter with Mad Max goggles and a metal detector but by the Director of National Intelligence's office, which, one assumes, has at least a passing acquaintance with the relevant classified projects. So could they belong to China or Russia? "We currently lack data to indicate any UAP are part of a foreign collection program or indicative of a major technological advancement by a potential adversary." What of "Airborne Clutter"? Balloons, plastic bags, birds, and other garbage aren't ruled out, but the document is explicitly formulated as a matter of national security (not to mention ongoing air-safety hazard), so it's hard to see why the government would go to such elaborate lengths to investigate incursions into restricted airspace by a Mylar Batman or an phalanx of egrets. The same might be said about weather; the eleven "reports of documented instances in which pilots reported near misses with a UAP" presumably had little to do with the growing menace of lenticular clouds.

Cutting through the thicket of bureaucratic language and cautious qualifications, readers of the report are left with basically two options: that some of the U.A.P.s could actually be advanced drones or drone swarms, one of the more compelling explanations for at least some fraction of these encounters; and, unavoidably, "Other." When it came to the "Other" category, some of the observed behaviors were so dramatically exotic that they required not only additional study and

additional analysis but perhaps additional physics: “Although most of the UAP described in our dataset probably remain unidentified due to limited data or challenges to collection processing or analysis, we may require additional scientific knowledge to successfully collect on, analyze and characterize some of them. We would group such objects in this category pending scientific advances that allowed us to better understand them. The UAPTF intends to focus additional analysis on the small number of cases where a UAP appeared to display unusual flight characteristics or signature management.”

The fact that there are eighteen cases in recent memory that apparently require unspecified “scientific advances” to comprehend seems to suggest that “Other” might not, after all, be a negligible bin. On the other hand, the report does note upfront that “these observations could be the result of sensor errors, spoofing, or observer misperception.” The debunker Mick West, who has offered a range of mundane explanations for what pass as purported U.F.O.s, tweeted that this line was a “key part of the report,” and that it was intended to invalidate “the claims of the more enthusiastic promoters of the ETH,” or the extraterrestrial hypothesis. Believers reminded him, often politely, that “could be” did not mean “were,” and that one would be hard-pressed to read such boilerplate disclaimers as a dispositive statement about anything. The report, in its caginess, lent itself to the kind of motivated reasoning that propels both sides of this long-standing, occasionally rancorous, and invariably delightful debate. The mystery remained. Further study was needed.

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