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UFOs Won't Go Away

A community of believers in extraterrestrial visitations continues to push its story, and the media and Pentagon continue to listen. Who benefits from these tales of close encounters?

In his annual performance evaluation for his job at the US Department of Defense (DOD), Luis Elizondo, a career military intelligence officer now in his late 40s, was lauded in 2016 for his ability to manage a highly classified program “in a manner that protects US national security interests on a global scale.” The office Elizondo oversaw had, among other things, “identified and neutralized 6 insider threats” and “co-authored 4 national-level policies involving covert action.” His work performance was rated as “exemplary.” The evaluator gushed that it “cannot be overstated the importance of Mr. Elizondo’s portfolio to national security.”

So it must have come as a surprise to at least some of Elizondo’s superiors when he departed the Pentagon a year later on a sour note. On October 4, 2017, Elizondo submitted a resignation letter—that he later made public—addressed to then Defense Secretary James Mattis, which warned that “bureaucratic challenges and inflexible mindsets” had prevented “anomalous aerospace threats” from being taken seriously within DOD leadership. There was “overwhelming evidence” of these threats, Elizondo wrote, “at both the classified and unclassified levels.” He referred vaguely to “many instances” of “unusual aerial systems interfering with military weapon platforms and displaying beyond-next-generation capabilities.” The letter urged Mattis “to ask the hard questions” about who else might know about these “phenomena” and their “capabilities.”

Days after exiting the Pentagon, Elizondo joined a new entertainment and research company cofounded by Tom DeLonge, formerly the lead singer and guitarist of the band Blink-182 and a paranormal enthusiast, who was known for spending his time between concert gigs on the hunt for un-

identified flying objects (UFOs) and Bigfoot. The for-profit venture was called To The Stars Academy of Arts & Science and included former Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials, as well as several scientists contracted over the years by US intelligence agencies.

In mid-December of 2017, several months after Elizondo left the DOD, the *New York Times* reported that he had recently overseen a “shadowy” \$22 million Pentagon program that investigated UFOs buzzing US military jets and installations. The aviation writer Stephen Pope called the article “borderline-sensationalist.” The science journalist Jeff Wise said it “gave free rein to claims that the [Pentagon] program had found evidence of strange aircraft that flew in seemingly impossible ways.”

Regardless, the story was picked up widely in the media. Elizondo, who had served as a primary source for the *Times* reporting, talked cryptically about the government’s UFO program on the major news channels. His credentialed background and earnest bearing made people pay attention. Notably, the Miami native did not sound like a crackpot who had watched too many *X-Files* episodes. In fact, during his media blitz Elizondo carefully avoided mentioning the term “UFOs” or anything that might be construed as a reference to extraterrestrials. But in one instance he deviated from his careful phrasing when he said on CNN, “My personal belief is that there is very compelling evidence we may not be alone.”

News of the Pentagon’s UFO program continued to generate headlines as more tidbits dribbled out via Elizondo and the new company he worked for. Other high-powered members of the To The Stars Academy also began airing their

concerns about unknown, physics-defying aircraft showing up in US airspace. One of these voices was Chris Mellon, who served as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence in the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. (In this capacity, Mellon oversaw the Pentagon's most sensitive and closely held "black" programs.) On March 9, 2018, he published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* titled, "The military keeps encountering UFOs. Why doesn't the Pentagon care?"

And so, in the span of a few months, a topic long confined to the tabloids and fringe media had become a "serious news story" as the *Post* asserted in its coverage last year, shortly after it published Mellon's op-ed.

We have all been here before

Most scientists with relevant expertise attribute UFO sightings to misperception of celestial or meteorological phenomena. Distant planets, comets, and clouds have often been mistaken for alien spacecraft by sophisticated observers. Even highly trained military and commercial airline pilots have been known to confuse atmospheric optical phenomena for mysterious flying objects.

Still, the disclosure of the Pentagon's UFO program, which officially existed between 2008 and 2012, has stirred interest on Capitol Hill. Members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees have requested details on the program; the latter has quietly interviewed a number of the military pilots who claim to have witnessed UFOs while on training missions. Influential to this effort is Mellon, a Washington insider for decades, who left the Pentagon in the early 2000s, did a stint as Democratic staff director for the Senate Intelligence Committee, and now works alongside Elizondo at the To The Stars Academy, which bills itself as an "initiative mobilizing the brightest minds from within the top-secret shadows of aerospace, science and the Department of Defense." That placard is at the top of a company website page that sells branded T-shirts, hoodies, and other merchandise.

Several years ago, Mellon told one interviewer that there were "sufficiently well-documented" UFO cases that "warrant a scientific investigation of the phenomenon." I have recently discussed with him the merits of this claim in phone and email conversations. In one such exchange in late 2018, I shared a comment I had received from a prominent astronomer who said he was "very skeptical about the alien interpretation of UFO reports" that had been circulating in the media.

Mellon was indignant. "I did not claim the objects were alien," he shot back in an email. "Merely real, intelligently controlled and not ours—hence the need to investigate further." Then he added: "Off to Govt mtgs in DC today with people who are on the front lines of this." In a follow-up exchange later that day, he mentioned that the people he was working with felt "an urgency to engage Uncle Sam and the public from a national security standpoint."

This was also the media's recent take on the Pentagon's UFO

program: that military and intelligence professionals had come forward to speak of UFO incidents that they believed should be treated as a national security matter. Several historians following this news heard an echo from the past. "What is so striking is that the rhetoric hasn't changed since the late 1940s, in ways that are stunning to me," says Kathryn Dorsch, a University of Pennsylvania historian whose research connects the rise of the UFO phenomenon to Cold War anxieties.

Greg Eghigian, a history professor at Penn State, was also taken aback after seeing the flurry of attention to UFOs sparked by the *Times* story. Like Dorsch, Eghigian studies the topic through a sociocultural lens. "When all this new stuff broke, I got déjà vu," he says.

To Eghigian and Dorsch, there are striking similarities between a central UFO narrative from the Cold War era and the one getting mainstream media attention of late. The two scholars also see notable parallels between the cast of characters that drew public attention to UFOs in the 1950s and those doing so today.

Which raises the question: Have alien-powered craft been stalking the skies since the Truman presidency, all the while remaining elusive and difficult to positively authenticate? And if so, is the "deep state" suppressing that evidence? Or might there be a less extraordinary explanation for a UFO narrative that has persisted for 70 years, ever since the dawn of the advanced aerospace age?

In the beginning

Historians trace the birth of the UFO phenomenon in the United States to an Associated Press dispatch in the early summer of 1947. The article stated that a private pilot named Kenneth Arnold reported seeing "nine bright saucer-like objects" while flying his small airplane above the state of Washington—what headline writers described as "flying saucers," thus coining a phrase that would soon become lodged in the public's imagination.

Others reported seeing similar objects (also described as "flying discs") in the following weeks and months, prompting nationwide headlines and an investigation by the US Air Force. It was an anxious time: the country was still recovering from World War II just as it was reckoning with the Soviet Union's nuclear ambitions. The flood of flying saucer reports spooked the military. Were people hallucinating, or seeing something from Moscow or Mars? Experts grasped for answers. A scientist interviewed by the *New York Times* in July 1947 called it a "mild case of meteorological jitters" and "mass hypnosis."

But the UFO sightings kept coming in waves over the next few years. Initially, Air Force investigators thought that the objects had been "domestically launched devices such as weather balloons, rockets, experimental flying wing aircraft, or celestial phenomenon." Some investigators gave serious consideration to the possibility of extraterrestrials. But by 1949, the official Air Force position was dismissive of that hypothesis and the

military sought to downplay UFO sightings.

This angered a group of well-connected ex-military officers who would soon get the ear of the public. Perhaps the most influential voice belonged to retired Marine Corps Major Donald Keyhoe, who in January 1950 published a much-publicized article in *True* magazine titled “Flying Saucers are Real.” Keyhoe slammed the military’s UFO investigation and proclaimed that Earth had “been under systematic close-range examination by living, intelligent observers from another planet.”

Keyhoe quickly expanded his popular article into a book with the same title. It sold more than half a million paperback copies. Several years later, he published another bestseller asserting that the Air Force was suppressing evidence of encounters between the military and interstellar UFOs.

The media seized on the public’s fascination with flying saucers. In 1952, *Life* magazine published a lengthy article titled “Have We Visitors From Outer Space?” The article concluded that dozens of sightings examined by government investigators were “seemingly unexplainable.” It also contained this eye-popping quote from an unnamed military intelligence officer: “The higher you go in the Air Force, the more seriously they take the flying saucers.”

The impact from *Life*’s story was “explosive” and “quickly led to a dramatic uptick in UFO sightings around the country,” writes Mark O’Connell in his recent book, *The Close Encounters Man*. By then, the Air Force had reopened its examination into the sightings. The newly assigned head of the investigation, Captain Edward Ruppelt, brought a somber, methodical approach to the effort. In Air Force verbiage, he replaced “flying saucer” with “Unidentified Flying Object,” which he is said to have considered more neutral and accurate. (Of course, in due time even the term “UFO” would become shorthand for alien spaceship.) Ruppelt oversaw what became known as Project Blue Book at a period in the early 1950s when the US government was grappling with a problem it didn’t fully understand.

Frustrated by bureaucratic issues and lack of support, Ruppelt left Project Blue Book after a few years and retired from the military. In a 1956 book about his experience, called *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, he wrote:

I wouldn’t class myself as a “believer,” exactly, because I’ve seen too many UFO reports that first appeared to be unexplainable fall to pieces when they were thoroughly investigated. But every time I begin to get skeptical I think of the other reports, the many reports made by experienced pilots and radar operators, scientists, and other people who know what they’re looking at. These reports were thoroughly investigated and they are still unknowns. Of these reports, the radar visual sightings are the most convincing. When a ground radar picks up a UFO target and a ground observer sees a light where the radar target is located, then a jet interceptor is scrambled to intercept the UFO and the pilot

also sees the light and gets a radar lock on only to have the UFO almost impudently outdistance him, there is no simple answer. We have no aircraft on this earth that can at will so handily outdistance our latest jets.

When I read this passage in Ruppelt’s book, I was struck by how much it resembled what Elizondo and Mellon have said publicly about supposed latter-day UFO incidents involving the military. Both have emphasized in conversations with me the importance of advanced twenty-first century spy radar systems that they say have detected “anomalous” aircraft, aka UFOs. But getting the Pentagon to acknowledge this has been another matter, they assert. More concerning, they say, is the military’s apparent lack of interest in the matter. “We cannot afford to avert our eyes, given the risk of strategic surprise,” Mellon writes in his 2018 *Washington Post* op-ed. “It is time to set aside taboos regarding ‘UFOs’ and instead listen to our pilots and radar operators.”

Perhaps the unknown objects being spotted by military radar are nothing to worry about, Mellon and Elizondo say,

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rhetorically, or maybe they are—except there’s no way to know unless the Pentagon spends money and manpower to find out.

“That’s the same argument Ruppelt made back in 1955 and 1956,” after he retired from the Air Force, says the Penn historian Dorsch, who is writing her doctoral thesis on the birth of UFO phenomenon.

Mellon and Elizondo have also said that they are frustrated by the institutional secrecy that prevents a more concerted government investigation into the “phenomena,” as they call it. This argument, too, is similar to what other media-savvy voices such as Keyhoe were saying in the 1950s, when he was president of a nonprofit organization called the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP). Its leadership included retired military and intelligence officials, such as a former chief of the Navy’s guided missile program. Another prominent member was Roscoe Hillenkoetter, who had served as the first director of the CIA, from 1947 to 1950.

These high-profile individuals gave NICAP credibility, but Keyhoe was its face. And he was a relentless, aggressive crusader; his frequent accusations that the military and CIA were hiding evidence of extraterrestrials planted the seeds of

conspiracy that would grow into a core UFO narrative that has since become a theme of UFO conventions and a multitude of books, movies, and television shows.

From Roswell with lies

This conspiracy narrative has its roots in a true historical event involving a classified military project initiated in 1947, at the dawn of the Cold War, and just as the UFO bug was sweeping the United States. Amid the flurry of sightings that year, one stood out: someone had found pieces of a “flying disc” on a ranch in Roswell, New Mexico. A local newspaper was told by an Air Force intelligence agent that a nearby military base had “come into the possession of a Flying Saucer.”

This was a deliberate falsehood. So was the next official press release from the government a day later, which stated that the object was actually a weather balloon. Despite this puzzling turnabout, the incident quickly faded from headlines as the UFO epidemic spread across the country in the summer and fall of 1947. Roswell did not serve as gruel for breathless tales in the media. In fact, it wound up being little more than a footnote in UFO annals for more than 30 years.

Several decades ago, the US military finally acknowledged that the object found at Roswell in the summer of 1947 was, in fact, a spy balloon that contained an instrument used to monitor sonic booms from anticipated nuclear tests by the Soviet Union.

Then, in 1980, a book called *The Roswell Incident* was published. One of its coauthors had previously written a bestseller about the Bermuda Triangle, which was a hot topic in the 1970s. *The Roswell Incident* claimed to find long-suppressed information about a crashed flying saucer and alien body that had been recovered in 1947 by the military. A UFO myth was born. It would, as one science writer later observed, launch “the modern wave of UFO crash/retrieval conspiracy beliefs.” Today, Roswell is the mother of all UFO conspiracies.

The truth, however, was something called Project Mogul. Several decades ago, the US military finally acknowledged that the object found at Roswell in the summer of 1947 was, in fact, a spy balloon that contained an instrument used to monitor sonic booms from anticipated nuclear tests by the Soviet Union. Of course, given that the military’s first words about the Roswell incident really were lies (not to mention the Pentagon’s general reputation for duplicity, especially during the Vietnam War), it is understandable why many UFO believers are reluctant to let Project Mogul stand as the final word on Roswell.

Then there is the matter of Area 51, a remote, highly classified Air Force base in the Nevada desert that until recent years

wasn’t even officially acknowledged to exist. In flying saucer lore, Area 51 represents an “underworld of aliens and captured UFOs,” as Annie Jacobsen puts it in her critically acclaimed 2011 book, *Area 51: An Uncensored History of America’s Top Secret Military Base*. But, as she writes, “The truth is that America’s most secret federal facility was set up to advance military science and technology faster and further than other foreign powers in the world.”

To understand those advances in military science and technology—and how they are cloaked in secrecy and cunning misdirection—is to understand the enduring power of mythical UFO narratives.

Mixed motives

When Luis Elizondo was at the Pentagon in the late 2000s, he was asked to take over security for the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP). He had experience in technology protection, having previously worked with Boeing and its Apache Longbow helicopter, and also with Raytheon and some of its cruise missile technology. A new aerospace-related assignment made sense.

But AATIP was different than anything he had worked on before. It was created in 2007 to study “anomalous aerospace threats,” a euphemism for UFOs. His job, he explained to me, was “making sure the Russians, the Chinese, our foreign adversaries, weren’t penetrating [AATIP] or developing some sort of deception campaign.” He cut himself off at this point. “I have to be careful, because we can get into classified stuff pretty quick.” After a brief pause, he continued: “Anytime you have a game-changing, advanced technology, your adversaries will want to know what it is, because it could be used against us. So there’s this huge effort try to figure out what the other side has.”

Evidently, there were security issues with the new UFO program that had to be addressed. “I knew there were counterintelligence problems that needed to be fixed,” Elizondo said. “I’m kind of like the plumber that needs to fix leaks.” He eventually took over the program and insists that he kept it afloat until he left in 2017, although funding officially dried up in 2012.

Whatever Elizondo learned while running AATIP seems to have convinced him that UFOs are real. And because he wasn’t able to convey this to higher-ups in the Pentagon’s chain of

command, he decided to quit and let the world know about the program. “That was the only way to continue the mission,” he said to me just before he was scheduled to speak at a “symposium” organized by the Mutual UFO Network, an organization of UFO believers, in the summer of 2018. He was the keynote speaker, part of a featured lineup that included a former logger whose story of alien abduction was made into the 1993 movie *Fire in the Sky*.

Until he showed up at the UFO gathering, Elizondo was careful not to do or say anything that would lump him in with the Elvis-on-Mars crowd. He was mindful of the stigma attached to a subject he wanted taken seriously by the Department of Defense. But now he was the headliner at a conference titled “UFOs, Extraterrestrials, and the Future of Humanity.” Why participate in that?

“I’m trying to get the conversation going,” Elizondo said to me, during a wide-ranging interview in his hotel room several hours before his scheduled talk. This perplexed me. The hundreds of attendees at this conference already believed in UFOs. A number of the panels were geared for “experiencers,” people who thought they had been touched in some way by space aliens. If Elizondo wanted UFOs to be treated as a national security matter, why come to venues such as this?

I thought that perhaps he was looking to attract new investors for the To The Stars Academy, which was on its way to crowdfunding more than two million dollars. There is, after all, a thriving UFO marketplace, fueled by conventions, podcasts, and popular pseudo-documentary shows such as the History Channel’s *Ancient Aliens*.

Elizondo resented the suggestion (already made by others) that he was in the UFO racket. “This is not a moneymaking endeavor for me,” he insisted, referring to his new company and role as a public figure speaking out about the threat posed by UFOs. (He said he refused to take a fee for his appearance at the conference.) Okay, then why did he come out from the shadows after a long, distinguished career as an intelligence officer? Why go public about a Pentagon program that had been deliberately shrouded in secrecy?

But Elizondo also resented the suggestion that he was a whistleblower, as some have characterized him. He was speaking out, he said, because he felt duty bound: “I’m doing this for the same reason I hunted terrorists in Afghanistan, the same reason I caught spies in South America, for the same reason I left the [Defense] Department—because there is a problem. We have pilots, soldiers, [radar] operators, men and woman who have seen something and in some cases are even being punished for reporting it. These are loyal Americans, people who run multimillion-dollar weapons platforms with live munitions over US cities and we don’t trust them to say, ‘There’s something there and I don’t know what the hell it is.’”

“I did not do this for frills and thrills,” he said coolly. “I did it to tell the truth.”

Within the conspiratorial ranks of the UFO community,

there are many who wonder about that. Their suspicions about Elizondo have their roots in the story of Richard Doty, a former special agent for the US Air Force Office of Special Investigations. Some years ago, Doty came forward to say that he had deliberately given false information to numerous self-styled UFO researchers when he was assigned to Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the 1980s. Doty fed his unwitting stooges fake evidence of captured aliens and flying saucers inside top secret military bases, which breathed life into the Roswell legend. A fascinating 2013 documentary called *Mirage Men* captures the extent of his deeds—in his own words and those of the UFO researchers who interacted with him.

Whether Doty is a fabulist or true confessor is impossible to verify and still hotly debated in UFO circles; if he has misrepresented himself, he has never been charged by the US government with any crimes. But as the science writer and podcaster Brian Denning has noted:

Much of Doty’s story is believable and dovetails very well into history. The late 1970s and early 80s were the years when the F-117 Nighthawk stealth attack aircraft was still a secret, but very much operational. Soviet spies desperately wanted information about it. Armies of UFOlogists had been encamped around every Air Force installation since the 1950s, documenting, filming and disclosing their findings at conferences. The Air Force very astutely assumed that Soviets were likely to have infiltrated the UFOlogy community to see what these legions of amateur investigators had found, and sent Doty (and, we presume, others like him) to provide stories of captured flying saucers and alien ambassadors working with the US government.

Elizondo has heard the rumors about himself floated on the internet—that he is a latter-day Richard Doty. These suspicions were also whispered to me in the hallways of the UFO conference he was headlining when we first met. “No, I am not running a government disinformation campaign,” he said to me when I caught up with him again at the end of the event. We talked over burgers and beers at an airport bar. For someone who had been an interrogator at Guantanamo Bay, Elizondo has a likable, disarming presence, which is a handy trait to possess if your goal is to earn the trust of those who might otherwise be suspicious of you.

We stayed in touch over the next few weeks, while I was working on a story about him for *Newsweek*. The suspicious whispers in UFO circles were getting louder. “This is a very hard path I am on and sometimes I wish I could fade off into the sunset and let someone else do this,” he texted me one day. “It really sucks being judged by people who have never met you and question your credibility and motivations every step of the way. I think I very much prefer the shadows.”

Trust us, we're experts

In 1966, Walter Cronkite (“the most trusted man in America”) hosted an hour-long CBS special report titled *UFO: Friend, Foe, or Fantasy*. At the time, the UFO craze in the United States showed no sign of ebbing. There had been periodic waves of sightings for nearly 20 years, spawning flying saucer cults, amateur groups of zealous researchers, and a lucrative genre of sci-fi movies and books.

For his show, Cronkite enlisted a number of prominent experts, such as a young astronomer named Carl Sagan, to demystify UFOs. J. Allen Hynek, another astronomer who was a scientific adviser to the Pentagon’s ongoing UFO investigation, also was featured. “To this time, there is no valid scientific proof that we have been visited by spaceships,” Hynek told Cronkite. “The great majority [of UFO sightings] are balloons, meteors, satellites, aircraft seen with the sun glistening off of them, and birds,” he explained. Hynek did allow that there were a very small number of “most interesting cases that intrigue me in the same way that a good mystery story intrigues me.” (Indeed, Hynek eventually did come to believe that some extraterrestrial or otherworldly presence might explain those unsolved mysteries.)

After Cronkite was done with the science portion of the show, he turned to other possible explanations, such as new military technology, “strange looking crafts” that had been created by the budding aerospace industry for the Air Force. There were also other unknown craft, he added, “probably being tested in secret.”

Still, public interest in UFOs could not be dimmed. Several years after Cronkite’s broadcast, the Air Force contracted with the University of Colorado (CU) to convene a distinguished panel of scientists on the subject. Led by the CU physicist Edward Condon, the group concluded in 1968 after an in-depth study that there was no basis to the extraterrestrial interpretation of UFO reports and “that nothing has come from the study of UFOs in the past 21 years.” The panel’s voluminous report totaled nearly 1,000 pages and focused “almost entirely on the physical sciences,” meaning it examined UFO sightings in the context of explainable celestial and meteorological phenomena. In 1969, a National Academy of Sciences panel reviewed the report and concurred with its finding, writing: “While further study of particular aspects of the topic (e.g., atmospheric phenomena) may be useful, a study of UFOs in general is not a promising way to expand scientific understanding of the phenomena.” Pointing to these conclusions, the Pentagon announced that it would no longer investigate UFO reports.

None of this seemed to reduce the allure of flying saucers. UFOs remained a hot topic into the 1970s, as a new wave of popular sci-fi films, such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *Alien*, continued to stoke public fascination. By the late 1990s, other big UFO subthemes had been prominently introduced into pop culture, such as the abduction phenom-

enon and government conspiracy narrative, via best-selling books and, of course, *The X-Files*.

The continued attention was also fed by new disclosures of previously unknown government interest in UFOs by US intelligence agencies. Using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), dogged UFO crusaders successfully sued the federal government to unearth documents that revealed that the CIA had been periodically monitoring UFO reports and the active community of believers since the 1950s. The agency, it turned out, had even commissioned its own classified study to determine if there was any substance to any of the UFO reports. (It reached the same conclusion as the CU-led and National Academy of Sciences panels.) Of course, the revelations of the CIA’s longtime interest in UFOs only reinforced the belief of many in the UFO community that the spy agency was hiding evidence of extraterrestrials.

Perhaps hoping to defuse this notion, the CIA in 1997 allowed its official historian, Gerald Haines, to publish a report explaining how the CIA’s U2 spy plane and other advanced reconnaissance projects, such as the SR-71 Blackbird, had frequently been mistaken for UFOs from the late 1950s through the 1960s. Haines acknowledged that the Air Force’s UFO investigators during this period had been made aware of the CIA’s ultra-secret spy projects, but were told not to reveal the true cause of many of the flying saucer sightings. “This led the Air Force to make misleading and deceptive statements to the public in order to allay public fears and to protect an extraordinarily sensitive national security project,” Haines wrote. “While perhaps justified,” he added, “this deception did end up adding fuel to the later conspiracy theories.”

Such deception might also have inadvertently contributed to the lingering distrust felt toward scientific experts by UFO believers. After all, those blue-ribbon panels in the late 1960s dismissed most sightings as optical illusions. Since then, scientists have become even more exasperated by the persistence of UFOs in the public mind. But we now know that a good number of those strange aircraft sightings were likely real—just not extraterrestrial in origin.

This larger, complex history of the UFO phenomenon is especially problematic for professionals in the military and intelligence community who have come forward of late with alarming stories of unknown “anomalous” aircraft and plead to be taken seriously.

They're back

On the afternoon of November 14, 2004, two F/A-18 “Super Hornet” fighter jets were 30 minutes into a training drill off the coast of Southern California when they were redirected by a Naval radio operator to a “real world situation.” Earlier that day, the USS *Nimitz* nuclear aircraft carrier and the USS *Princeton* missile cruiser had detected more than a dozen unidentified objects on their radar screens—what the Navy

then referred to as Anomalous Aircraft Vehicles.

The F/A-18s were told by the *Princeton's* captain to intercept the closest anomalous vehicle, which was located about 150 miles southwest of the San Diego coastline. When the pilots reached their coordinates, they spotted from an altitude of 20,000 feet a disturbance at the ocean's surface. One of the pilots, Commanding Officer Dave Fravor, reported that he saw a white oval or "Tic Tac"-shaped object about 50 to 60 feet in size moving just above the churning water.

Fravor headed down for a closer look. What happened next was "like nothing I've ever seen," he recounted in 2018 in a video posted on the internet: the object accelerated so fast that it disappeared in a blink of an eye. A pilot in the other F/A-18 has described the episode similarly; he also says he watched as the object zipped around Fravor's plane before it darted off in a flash.

Meanwhile, according to testimony from Petty Officer Gary Voorhis, who was stationed on the *Princeton* at the time of the episode: "At a certain point there ended up being multiple objects that we were tracking. That was towards the end of the encounter and they all generally zoomed around at ridiculous speeds, and angles, and trajectories and then eventually they all bugged out faster than our radars."

The entire episode, which lasted between five and seven minutes, was monitored on the *Princeton's* Command Information Center, according to an unpublished paper that analyzes the incident, authored by a group of longtime UFO researchers, several of whom have scientific backgrounds and careers in the semiconductor and aerospace industries.

The paper reveals that in the immediate aftermath of the incident, a video of the encounter was shared and viewed widely by members aboard the *Princeton* and *Nimitz* via an internal military email system. Then, according to three witnesses of the Tic Tac episode interviewed by the paper's authors: "The communication logs, the radar data, and other associated electronic information was removed from the USS *Princeton* and a copy of the video from the USS *Nimitz*."

According to the paper, here's what happened: within 12 hours of the incident, a helicopter carrying nonuniformed personnel landed on the *Princeton*. They approached Petty Officer Voorhis, who was in charge of the ship's Cooperative Engagement Capability (CEC) system, and requested that he turn over all the ship's radar data, electronic information, data recordings. He asked for their identification, and when they refused, he told them that he needed permission from the ship's captain before complying. Shortly after that, his captain gave him the order and Voorhis relinquished all the information, which was stored on magnetic tapes.

The tapes contained crucial data that would easily shed light on the mysterious Tic Tac-shaped object. Said Voorhis to the paper's authors: "You could literally plot the entire course of the object, you could extract the densities, the speeds, the way it moved, the way it displaced the air, its radar cross-section,

how much of the radar itself was reflected off its surface. I mean you could pretty much recreate the entire event with the CEC data."

After I read this, I thought back to the gist of Elizondo's beef with the Defense Department, and Mellon's complaint in his *Washington Post* op-ed, that such incidents (and others like it) "remain largely ignored and unevaluated" by the military.

That does not seem to be the case with the *Nimitz* event, unless the former airmen and sailors who spoke on the record to Robert Powell, the lead author of the paper, have concocted the aforementioned chain of events—and in coordination with one another to keep their stories straight. But here again, Powell and his colleagues, despite their bias in favor of extraordinary explanations of what happened, also did their homework. They found a 2013 Facebook page for the *Nimitz* that contains a conversation about the 2004 incident among various shipmates who served together at the time. All those on duty that day recalled it vividly in their Facebook comments; many said they were still befuddled by what they saw and why the data mysteriously disappeared.

Hard data, credible witnesses

The paper that meticulously chronicles the *Nimitz* incident is titled "A Forensic Analysis of Navy Carrier Strike Group Eleven's Encounter with an Anomalous Aerial Vehicle." Two of the primary authors, including Powell, gave a detailed presentation at a conference in Huntsville, Alabama, in mid-March of 2019, called the "Scientific Conference on Anomalous Aerospace Phenomena." The conference was organized by a group of academics, engineers, and scientists that calls itself the "Scientific Coalition for UFOlogy" (and includes scientists from NASA, the European Space Agency, and the North American Aerospace Defense Command). The group says it endeavors to take a cold-eyed approach to the UFO issue, and as such, examines only cases that have hard data and credible witnesses. "We're looking to stay neutral and build a coalition of like-minded scientists," says Rich Hoffman, who does information systems work for the US military and was the lead organizer of the event.

I attended the conference, curious to see if science would really take center stage at a UFO event. To my surprise, the panels were staid PowerPoint presentations. No talk of abductions or Big Foot; just lots of mathematical formulas from physicists about the challenges of interstellar travel and space propulsion, and clinical examinations of several incidents involving supposed UFOs, such as the *Nimitz* case.

The big draw, though, was Elizondo, who gave a talk on the opening night. He didn't offer anything new or noteworthy about the UFO program he once led at the Penta-

gon, although he did say the “effort” was ongoing. (A public affairs officer at the Pentagon has said the program expired in 2012.) Elizondo told the audience that he had remained in close touch with his successor. In fact, he said that earlier in the week he had “received a call from a friend of mine, a very dear colleague of mine, who’s still at the Pentagon, who works this effort, very closely.” Elizondo then paused briefly. “You can read between the lines. When I say ‘is working this effort,’ I don’t mean the past, but actively working this. So it definitely continues. It’s still going. That, too, will come out hopefully soon in a very official way.”

Elizondo went on to insist that “disclosure has occurred” and that UFOs “are real.” Moreover, he added, “We have also established that fact from a national security perspective. You now have people at the highest levels of the United States government and international communities of their governments finally taking this serious, applying real resources, real talent, real expertise to look at this and finally figure out what this is.”

Next he addressed the elephant in the room. “Am I a spy for the CIA trying to fool people and do soft disclosure?” he asked rhetorically. “At the end of the day, who cares? You’re getting the information that was squirreled away in these little secret hidden compartments. It’s now coming to light.”

I approached Elizondo after his presentation to say hello and see if I could get another interview with him. He was cordial and open to talking, but said that it would have to be off the record. I found that disappointing, but understandable. Since we first met nearly a year ago, he had not been pleased with critics on social media and blogs who were scrutinizing his every move and utterance. He and his UFO company were under a sharp microscope. For example, in late 2018, Elizondo had traveled to Rome to give a presentation to European UFO buffs that was videotaped and quickly posted to the internet. Skeptics found the talk littered with dubious historical claims, including a reference he made to the 1947 “Roswell incident” that suggested the real truth was still unknown. “I’m not going to speculate in this room what crashed at Roswell,” he told that audience, before proceeding to cast doubt on the official explanation given at the time, as if he was unaware of Project Mogul’s disclosure.

An American tradition

In his Rome talk, Elizondo also discussed a famous 1952 incident when flying saucers were reported over Washington, DC. There is no historical photo that captures the supposed UFOs, but in his talk Elizondo showed a slide that suggested one existed. “It was actually a still [image] from a CGI [computer generated animation],” says John Greenwald, a longtime FOIA archivist who discusses Elizondo in a newly published book titled *Inside the Black Vault: The Government’s UFO Secrets Revealed*. As soon as this was pointed out to Elizondo on the internet, he apologized for the error

on his company’s Facebook page.

There are other discrepancies that have put him on the hot seat. He and his company have facilitated the release of video footage that show military pilots engaging with supposed UFOs. Several of these, including a grainy 45-second video of the *Nimitz* incident, have gone viral online, due in part to the recent media coverage that he and Mellon have received. Elizondo has insisted that the videos were declassified and released by the Pentagon in 2017, which the Pentagon denies. Even odder, a video of the *Nimitz* incident—the same one the *New York Times* embedded in its 2017 article and claimed to have received from the Pentagon—was already bouncing around on the internet in 2007.

Whatever its provenance, it is this video and others like it that Elizondo and Chris Mellon cite as compelling evidence of aerial wizardry by UFOs that pose a threat to US national security. As one might expect, an online army of eyes with many years of aviation and aerospace experience have minutely examined the videos. The crowdsourcing consensus, helpfully compiled into a detailed rundown of the incident at a popular skeptic’s blog, is that the “anomalous phenomena” asserted by Elizondo and Mellon are more likely explained as sightings of some sort of classified missile or aircraft, perhaps a drone, being tested at the time.

That would make sense given the mysterious scrubbing of electronic data relating to the 2004 incident, as reported by various crew members on the *Nimitz* and *Princeton*. Perhaps the aerial phenomena around which Elizondo and Mellon seek to cast such a veil of mystery can instead be chalked up to a familiar cause of UFO sightings over the past seven decades—advanced military aircraft and weaponry that the Pentagon is trying to keep secret.

For those unsure what to believe, Elizondo offered these words of wisdom to a suspicious questioner at the 2018 International UFO Congress in Phoenix: “I would say remain skeptical. Healthy skepticism is very important; in fact, it’s imperative. In fact, in my job as an intelligence officer, I was paid to be skeptical. I think you should always question all the information that comes before you by anybody who says anything, and I think that’s true not just with people like me, I think it’s true with government, religion, and everything in between.” For a journalist trying to make sense of it all, the skepticism comes naturally. If Elizondo, Mellon, and the To The Stars Academy seem to be working in the great American tradition of P. T. Barnum, the irony remains that the Pentagon may well have its own good reason for keeping the UFO story alive. Not that they’d ever admit it.

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