

Extraterrestrial Fascinations: The Pentagon and UFOs

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Global Research, December 27, 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

Conspiracies in the extraterrestrial department have always constituted the residue of superstition in a secular age. Chase away a Christ figure, or ward off God, and the mind still wanders, hoping to be bewitched. If something cannot be explained, ignorance furnishes an often poor substitute.

The concept of extraterrestrial phenomena straddles scientific probabilities, faith and the sense that governments might not be telling their citizens the whole truth. Rarely, for instance, does speculation on extraterrestrial research feature in the mainstream press, though the [New York Times](#) decided to dabble in the business of UFOs this month.

The paper noted, quite rightly, that the US Defense Department, known to most others as the Pentagon, had put aside \$22 million of its \$600 billion annual budget on the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program (AATIP). Identifying exactly where it was in the bureaucratic apparatus remained a contrived challenge, and it had its opponents.

The program, run by Luis Elizondo on the fifth floor of the Pentagon's C Ring, was deeply concealed within the structure itself. Supposedly concluding in 2012, supporters are certain that funding continues to, if not flow then certainly trickle to it.

A video shows an encounter between a Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet and an unknown object. It was released by the Defense Department's Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program. By Courtesy of U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE on Publish Date December 16, 2017.

The study of UFO phenomena in US bureaucracy is a study of bureaucratic quirkiness itself. Shadowy and opaque, the connections stretch across from Nevada Democrat Harry Reid, himself a fan of all things space, to billionaire friend, Robert Bigelow, who happily received government sponsorship for his aerospace venture.

The official record on US interest in the extraterrestrial research has been sketchy and speculative. The US government, officially at least, claimed to have stopped gathering information on the subject of UFOs in 1969 with the cancellation of Project Blue Book by the US Air Force. As the [National Archives](#) describes on a sombre note,

"The project closed in 1969 and we have no information on sightings after that date."

[Project Blue Book](#) itself concluded after examining UFO reports since 1948 that no such entity reported, investigated or evaluated by the USAF posed a threat; that such sightings

did not suggest “technological developments or principles beyond the range of present-day scientific knowledge” and that, perhaps most damningly of all, no sightings filed as “unidentified” could be deemed extraterrestrial vehicles.

Such reports, far from dissuading, have quite the opposite effect. In May, Bigelow told [Lara Logan of 60 Minutes](#) about his absolute conviction about alien life forms, and “an existing presence, an ET presence. And I spent millions and millions and millions – I spent probably more as an individual than anybody else in the United States has ever spent on this subject.” (Bigelow, typically, confuses expenditure and dedication with verifiable sightings.)

In of itself, Bigelow’s interest is admirable. But curiosity finds idiosyncratic ways of making a mark. It is not merely the scientific level that matters but one of induced faith, a Damascene conversion that turns a figure into a devotee.

Interest in investigating the existence of other life forms, Bigelow contends, arose after his grandparents encountered an UFO outside Las Vegas. (Those aliens really have a thing for that part of the world.)

“It really sped up and came right into their faces and filled up the entire windshield of the car.”

That particular object conformed to caricature, darting “off at a right angle and shot off into the distance.”

For Reid, a vital figure behind creating the AATIP, nothing but pride comes to mind.

“I am not embarrassed or ashamed or sorry I got this thing going. I think it’s one of the good things I did in my congressional service. I’ve done something that no one has done before.”

Reid, however, doesn’t stop there. He speaks about the findings of the Pentagon unit with a dazed piousness, telling Las Vegas news channel [KLAS Channel 8](#), about the inherent dangers. This is the technology imperative, one constantly manifested during the Cold War: the fear that somewhere, something or someone, is so advanced as to strike terror in the human species. Behind every ET phenomenon and unidentified object is a primordial fear that another earthly being is doing better and just might be a threat. Forget the ETs: the darkness lies within.

As Reid himself explained,

“If China, Russia, Japan, other countries are doing this and we’re not, then something is wrong because if the technology, as described and the way people see this movement took place in anything we have available to us, it would kill everybody.”

The technology imperative, one which acts as a discouragement for certain scientists in contacting potential alien forms, also finds voice in [Stephen Hawking’s concerns](#) that aliens could be “vastly more powerful and may not see us as any more valuable than we see bacteria.”

There will always be alien boffins. Some, like [Douglas Vakoch](#), president of the Messaging Extraterrestrial Intelligence (METI), envisage a planet or planets in the universe with liquid water, hosting life. Such grounds do not sound merely sensible but probable. Then there are the Reids and the Bigelows, a mixture of political and personal enchantment, part crazed part curious. But to date, the sceptics on the current record of sightings seem to be holding the reins. The truth might be out there, but it remains happily inscrutable.

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