

Government UFO report is the product of years of military infighting over whether to take sightings seriously

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NASA chief says the agency is investigating UFOs

Washington (CNN) — Members of the House Intelligence Committee will receive a

classified briefing on Wednesday morning on one of the most controversial topics circulating in Washington today: UFOs.

The briefing, which was confirmed to CNN by two sources familiar with the committee's plans, comes just weeks before the US intelligence community is scheduled to deliver an unclassified report on the matter for Congress. According to one committee source, Wednesday's briefing will be conducted by the Navy and FBI.

The fact that Congress is receiving briefings and the intelligence community is producing reports on what the Pentagon has labeled UAPs (Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon) is itself extraordinary. After years of Washington infighting, including bureaucratic battles within the Pentagon and pressure from certain members of Congress, the US government finally appears to be taking seriously what has for so long been considered a fringe issue.

Even as sightings of unexplainable objects rose into the hundreds, Pentagon officials wrestled with how much time and resources to devote to investigating them. Interviews with a half-dozen officials as well as documents reviewed by CNN depict a US military and intelligence community that's struggled over how to remove the issue from the world of science fiction and consider its actual national security implications.

Even now, multiple sources told CNN, the government almost certainly wouldn't have moved to produce the report without public pressure from key lawmakers, as both Republicans and Democrats have taken an interest in the matter.

While former senior defense officials with knowledge of the most recent iteration of the department's investigations say the Pentagon took it seriously, some pilots and former officials tasked with investigating the matter say senior Pentagon leaders downplayed or ignored the threat.

"Everyone who's paid enough attention to it understands they need to take it seriously," said former deputy defense secretary David Norquist, who set up a task force in 2020 to investigate UAPs. "But once you go beyond that circle, you get people who are understandably resistant because of the tinfoil hat stigma."

For most serious people inside the Pentagon studying the strange incidents, the former officials said, the investigation is not about proving whether or not aliens are visiting Earth and buzzing Navy pilots. Rather, it's about trying to understand what is behind these otherwise unexplainable encounters in US airspace. In particular, some officials are concerned that they might be some kind of next-gen technology deployed by China or Russia.

“If [these objects] had the flag of Russia on the side, we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” Norquist said. “Every one of these would be reported; everyone would be on top of it.”

The report, which is due to Congress in late June, isn’t likely to resolve the debate – nor is it expected to provide the kind of juicy details UFO-ologists hoped for, like confirming that strange sightings by American Navy pilots were alien spacecraft. One administration official noted that many of the incidents in the Pentagon’s database of encounters will likely turn out to have multiple causes – a strange weather anomaly combined with a weather balloon sighting on the horizon, for example. But some could eventually turn out to be adversaries operating in US airspace, that person said.

For that reason alone, officials are likely to be reluctant to offer too many details of what they’ve seen in the upcoming report: If any of these incidents are Russia or China or another nation state, the US won’t want to show what they know for counterintelligence reasons.

Proof that the US government has made contact with extraterrestrial life – what UFO-ologists call “the Disclosure” – will have to wait for another day.

Growing pressure on the Pentagon

The US government has sporadically examined the phenomenon for decades. One iteration began in 2007 when the Defense Department began running an investigation known as the “Advanced Aviation Threat Identification Program.” The program was officially shut down in 2012 – although a former head of the division claims that its work continued part-time at least into 2017.

That same year, the Pentagon confirmed the legitimacy of a Navy video of a 2004 encounter that took off the coast of San Diego, sparking considerable national attention. In the video, two Navy F-18 fighter jet pilots from the aircraft carrier Nimitz chase a white oval object the size of a commercial plane.

The release of several additional videos in 2018 and 2020, along with consistent advocacy from a small group of former defense officials and several lawmakers who received numerous briefings on the topic – most notably former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid – contributed to “years of build-up around the UFO issue,” a congressional aide said.





The image from video provided by the Department of Defense shows an unexplained object as it soars high along the clouds, traveling against the wind.

Luis Elizondo, the former head of the Advanced Aviation Threat Identification Program, resigned in 2017 out of frustration that senior defense leaders weren't taking the issue seriously enough. He argues that skeptical Pentagon leaders ignored the threat, misled the public and damaged his career, according to documents reviewed by CNN, including a complaint Elizondo filed with the Defense Department's Inspector General.

Separately, internal DoD emails, reviewed by CNN, suggest that as recently as last summer, Pentagon officials resisted any attempt to inform the public about UAPs and even issued guidance instructing press officers to "make no comment" when approached with any inquiries related to the issue.

The concern, according to an email from July 2020, was that the "nuances of all this are such that any deviation from the statements DoD makes results in multiple news stories and additional FOIA requests at various levels."

Erasing the stigma

In August 2020, Norquist publicly announced the formation of a task force to study the matter. The goal, he said, was in part to remove the stigma of pilots talking about strange things they saw. Officials wanted to "start educating our pilots and get them to the point where they understand this is credible enough [that] we really need you to report this and you shouldn't be afraid that you're going to get grief from the department because you said this."

At that point, the former official said, the small task force working the issue understood that the data surrounding these encounters – including radar and other technical information that theoretically couldn't be spoofed or attributed to pilot misperception – pointed to a real event.



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“You sort of had to get the ritual joke out of the way,” Norquist said. “But everyone who dealt with it, when they saw the information understood, it is sufficiently credible [and] we need to find out why.”

Erasing the stigma surrounding a serious discussion of UFOs was also the goal for lawmakers in 2020 when they passed legislation requiring the Pentagon and intelligence community to provide more information about these UFO encounters, details that have, until recently, largely remained shrouded in secrecy.

“Everyone recognizes when you start talking about this, it's way too easy for it to get weird,” said Norquist. “And yet, if there had never been a discussion in the United States about UFOs, we'd want to be all over this.”

An inspector general complaint

Restoring some credibility to discussions about UFOs will be a challenge even after the report is submitted to Congress. Elizondo believes his career was derailed because of his enthusiasm for the program focused on dealing with such encounters.

Others think it's because officials like Elizondo leaned too far into the tantalizing possibility that the objects were from another world, tainting the effort with sci-fi undertones.

“It does not surprise me that somebody could work on this program and come away with that as a possibility and then become frustrated that others aren't pursuing this with the same vigor as other programs that the defense department works on,” Norquist said.

In the full version of his inspector general complaint, which was reviewed by CNN, Elizondo says that senior officials dismissed his work on UFOs and he accuses some of actively trying to discredit and undermine him inside the Pentagon and with members of the media.

In his complaint, Elizondo recounts a particularly heated exchange in October 2017, shortly after he submitted his resignation letter, during which a senior DoD official threatened to “tell people you are crazy,” noting it could impact his security clearance.

The next month, Elizondo claims he was told that the senior-level official was “coming after (him),” at which time he said he decided to hire legal counsel.

CNN’s Barbara Starr and Jeremy Herb contributed to this report.

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