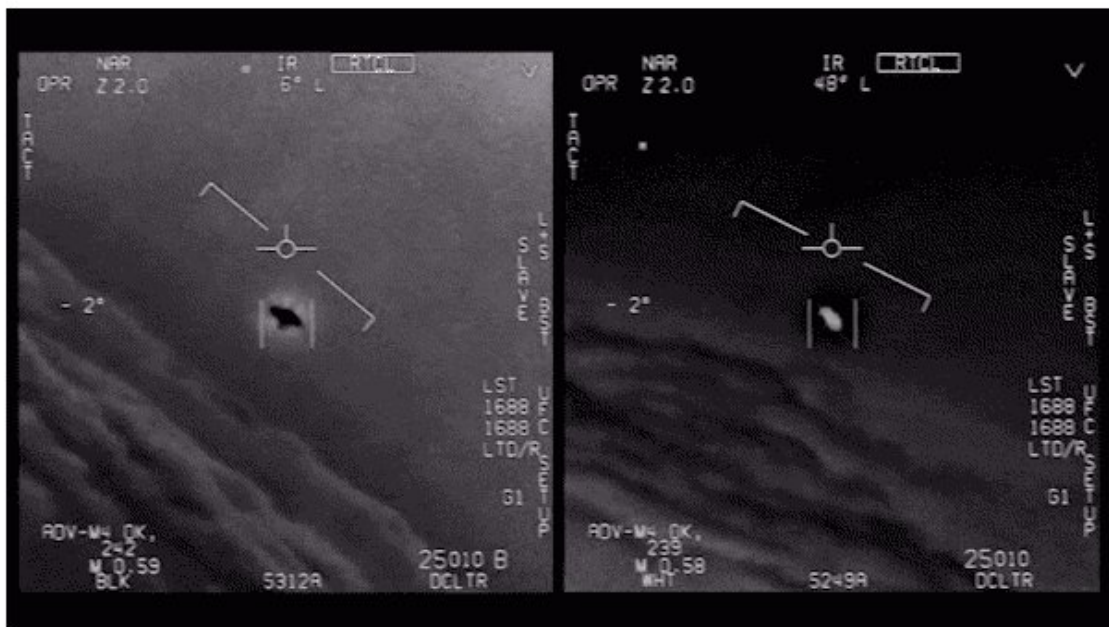


On the Trail of a Secret Pentagon U.F.O. Program

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Videos show an encounter between a Navy Super Hornet and an unknown object. U.S. Department of Defense

By **Ralph Blumenthal**

Dec. 18, 2017

Our readers are plenty interested in unidentified flying objects. We know that from the huge response to our [front-page Sunday article](#) (published online just after noon on Saturday) revealing a secret Pentagon program to investigate U.F.O.s. The piece, by the [Pentagon](#) correspondent Helene Cooper, the author Leslie Kean and myself — a contributor to The Times after a 45-year staff career — has dominated the most emailed and most

viewed lists since.

So how does a story on U.F.O.s get into The New York Times? Not easily, and only after a great deal of vetting, I assure you.

The journey began two and a half months ago with a tip to Leslie, who has long reported on U.F.O.s and published a 2010 New York Times best seller, “UFOs: Generals, Pilots and Government Officials Go on the Record.” At a confidential meeting Oct. 4 in a Pentagon City hotel with several present and former intelligence officials and a defense contractor, she met Luis Elizondo, the director of a Pentagon program she had never heard of: the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program.

She learned it was a secret effort, funded at the initiative of the then Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, starting in 2007, to investigate aerial threats including what the military preferred to call “unidentified aerial phenomena” or just “objects.” This was big news because the United States military had announced as far back as 1969 that U.F.O.s were not worth studying. Leslie also learned that Mr. Elizondo had just resigned to protest what he characterized as excessive secrecy and internal opposition — the reason for the meeting.

She spent hours with him reviewing unclassified documents, for the \$22 million program operated largely “in the white” (that is, not under special restricted access), but hidden in the huge defense budget, with only parts of it classified. A few days later Mr. Elizondo and others there — including Harold E. Puthoff, an engineer who has conducted research on extrasensory perception for the C.I.A. and later worked as a contractor on the program, and Christopher K. Mellon, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence — announced they were joining a new commercial venture, To the Stars Academy of Arts and Science, to raise money for research into U.F.O.s. Leslie wrote it up for the Huffington Post with scant details of the program.

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I had known Leslie for years, and she told me this looked like a story for The Times. I agreed. Leslie and I met with Mr. Elizondo in Philadelphia on Oct. 31. Three days later, I emailed the executive editor, Dean Baquet, about “a sensational and highly confidential time-sensitive story” that I said “involves a senior U.S. intelligence official who abruptly quit last month” exposing “a deeply secret program, long mythologized but now confirmed.”

He alerted Mark Mazzetti, the investigations editor in the Washington bureau. Leslie and I briefed him in New York on Nov. 7. We assured him there were no anonymous sources; everyone was on the record. After discussions in Washington and New York, Helene joined our team. The Washington bureau chief, Elisabeth Bumiller, would be our editor. On Nov. 17, we three met Mr. Elizondo in a nondescript Washington hotel where he sat with his back to the wall, keeping an eye on the door.

Carl Hulse, The Times's chief Washington correspondent, was well acquainted with Mr. Reid and helped arrange an interview for Helene. She flew to Las Vegas on Dec. 5 and met with the former senator, who confirmed the program with details, saying, “I'm not embarrassed or ashamed or sorry I got this going.”

Leslie interviewed the aerospace magnate Robert Bigelow, who also confirmed his participation, saying Americans were being held back from serious research into U.F.O.'s by “a juvenile taboo.” And I interviewed a prominent skeptic for perspective.

It was important that we not take anything on faith. This field attracts zealots as well as debunkers, and many Americans remain deeply skeptical that the phenomenon exists as popularly portrayed. In draft after draft, we took pains to let the investigation speak for itself, without bias.

Helene met with a Pentagon spokesperson on Dec. 8 for a response to the information we had gathered. The answer came swiftly. There had been a program to investigate U.F.O.s, but it ended in 2012 after five years, the

Defense Department insisted.

Our reporting suggested it continues, largely unfunded, to the present.
And that's what we wrote.

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