

POLITICS NEWS

'Truth embargo': UFOs are suddenly all the talk in Washington

After 75 years of taboo and ridicule, serious people can finally discuss the mysterious flying objects, and even skeptics say that's a good thing.



— Chelsea Stahl / NBC News; Getty Images



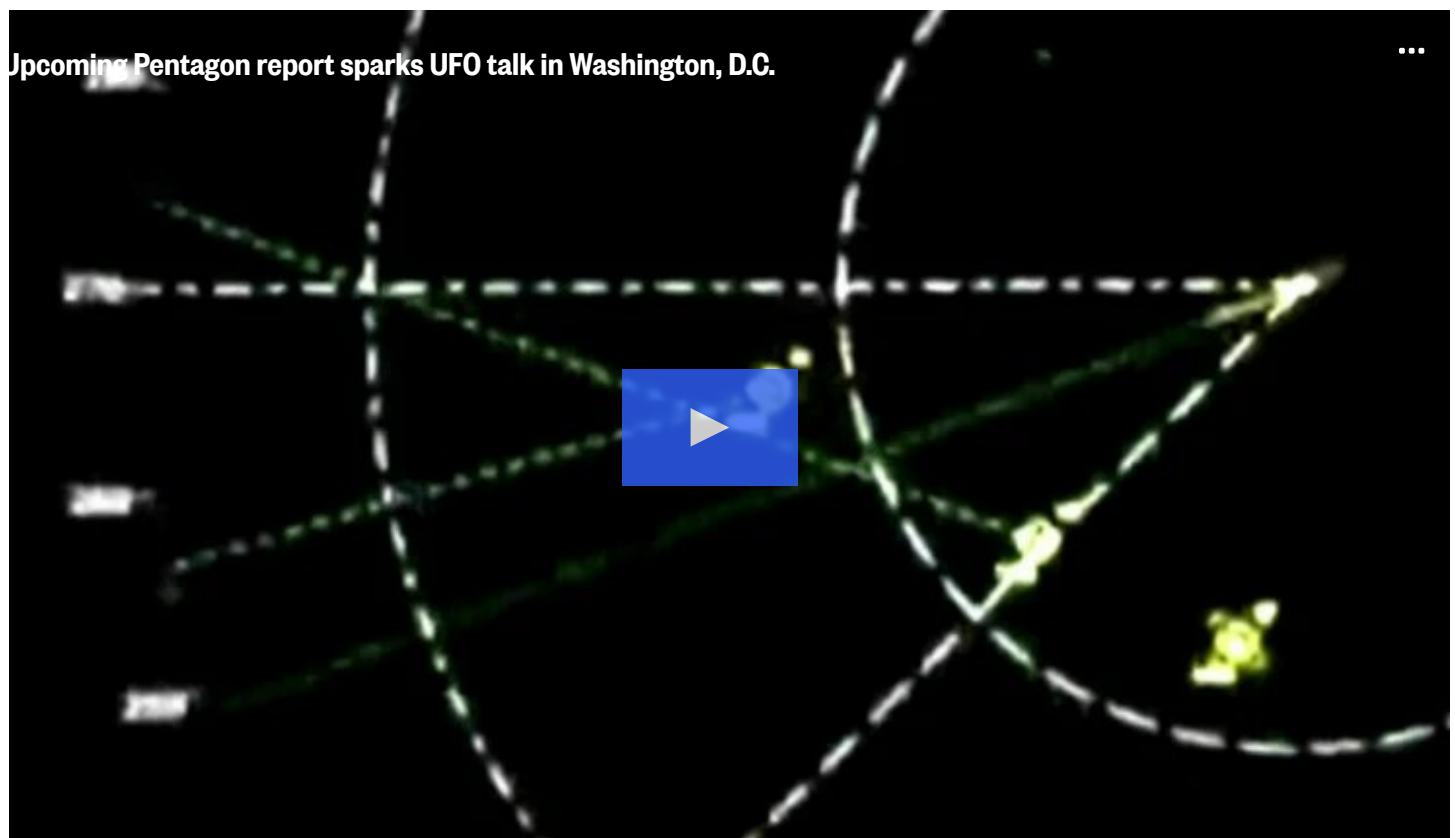
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By Alex Seitz-Wald

WASHINGTON – [Stephen Bassett](#) and [Mick West](#) don't agree on much. Bassett has devoted much of his adult life to proving [UFOs](#) are helmed by aliens, and West has devoted much of his to proving they are not.

But they both agree on one thing: It's good that, after nearly 75 years of taboo and ridicule going back to [Roswell](#), New Mexico, serious people are finally [talking seriously](#) about the unidentified flying objects people see in the skies.

“If you look at the level of public interest, then I think it becomes important to actually look into these things,” said West, a former video game programmer turned UFO debunker. “Right now, there is a lot of suspicion that the government is hiding evidence of UFOs, which is quite understandable because there's this wall of secrecy. It leads to suspicion and distrust of the government, which, as we've seen, can be quite dangerous.”



Later this month, the Pentagon is expected to [deliver a report to Congress](#) from a task force it established last year to collect information about what officials now call "unexplained aerial phenomena," or UAPs, from across the government after pilots came forward with captivating videos that appear to show objects moving in ways that defy known laws of physics.

While those who dabble in the unknowns of outer space are hoping for alien evidence, many others in government hope the report will settle whether the objects might be spy operations from neighbors on Earth, like the Chinese or Russians.

The highly anticipated report is expected to settle little, finding no evidence of extraterrestrial activity while not ruling it out either, [according to officials](#), but it will jumpstart a long-suppressed conversation and open new possibilities for research and discovery and perhaps defense contracts.

"If you step back and look at the larger context of how we've learned stuff about the larger nature of reality, some of it does come from studying things that might seem ridiculous or unbelievable," Caleb Scharf, an astronomer who runs the Astrobiology Center at Columbia University.

Suddenly, [senators](#) and [scientists](#), the [Pentagon](#) and [presidents](#), former CIA directors and NASA officials, [Wall Street executives](#) and [Silicon Valley investors](#) are starting to talk openly about an issue that would previously be discussed only in whispers, if at all.

"What is true, and I'm actually being serious here, is that there is footage and records of objects in the skies that we don't know exactly what they are," [former President Barack Obama told late-night TV host James Corden](#).

The omertà has been broken thanks to a new generation of more professional activists with more compelling evidence, a few key allies in government and the lack of compelling national security justification for maintaining the official silence, which has failed to tamp down interest in UFOs.

In a deeply polarized country where [conspiracy theories](#) have [ripped](#) apart [American politics](#), belief in a UFO coverup seems relatively quaint and apolitical.

'Truth embargo'

Interest in UFOs waxes and wanes in American culture, but millions have questions and about one-third of Americans think we have been visited by alien spacecraft, according to [Gallup](#).

But those questions have been met with silence or laughter from authorities and the academy, leaving a vacuum that has been filled by conspiracy theorists, hoaxsters and amateur investigators.

West, the skeptic, thinks the recent videos that kicked off the latest UFO craze, including three

published by the New York Times and CBS' "60 Minutes," can be explained by optical camera effects. But he would like to see the U.S. government thoroughly investigate and explain UFOs.

The government has examined UFOs in the past but often in secret or narrow ways, and the current Pentagon task force is thought to be relatively limited in its mission and resources.



— In a new, leaked video, an unidentified object flies around a Navy ship off the coast of San Diego.

U.S. Navy via Jeremy Corbell

West pointed to models from other countries like [Argentina](#), where an official government agency investigates sightings and publishes its findings, the overwhelming majority of which are traced to unusual weather, human objects like planes or optical effects.

"This is something that we could do here," West said. "But right now we're left with people like me, who are just enthusiasts."

John Podesta, a Democratic poobah who has held top jobs in several White Houses, has called on President Joe Biden's White House to establish a new dedicated office in the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy, which would help get the issue out of the shadows of the military and intelligence community.

Podesta, who has harbored an interest in UFOs since at least his days as Bill Clinton's chief of staff, recently [told Politico](#), "It was kind of career-ending to basically talk about this subject. That has clearly switched, and that's a good thing."

Believers are unsurprisingly thrilled by the culture shift.

“The ‘truth embargo’ is coming to an end now,” said Bassett, the executive director of Paradigm Research Group and the only registered lobbyist in Washington dedicated to UFO disclosure. “I am elated to finally see this movement achieving its moment.”

Bassett is convinced the government is covering up proof of extraterrestrial life and that everything happening now is elaborate political theater to make that information public in the least disruptive way possible – a view, of course, not supported by evidence or most experts.

“This is the most profound event in human history that's about to be taking place,” he said.

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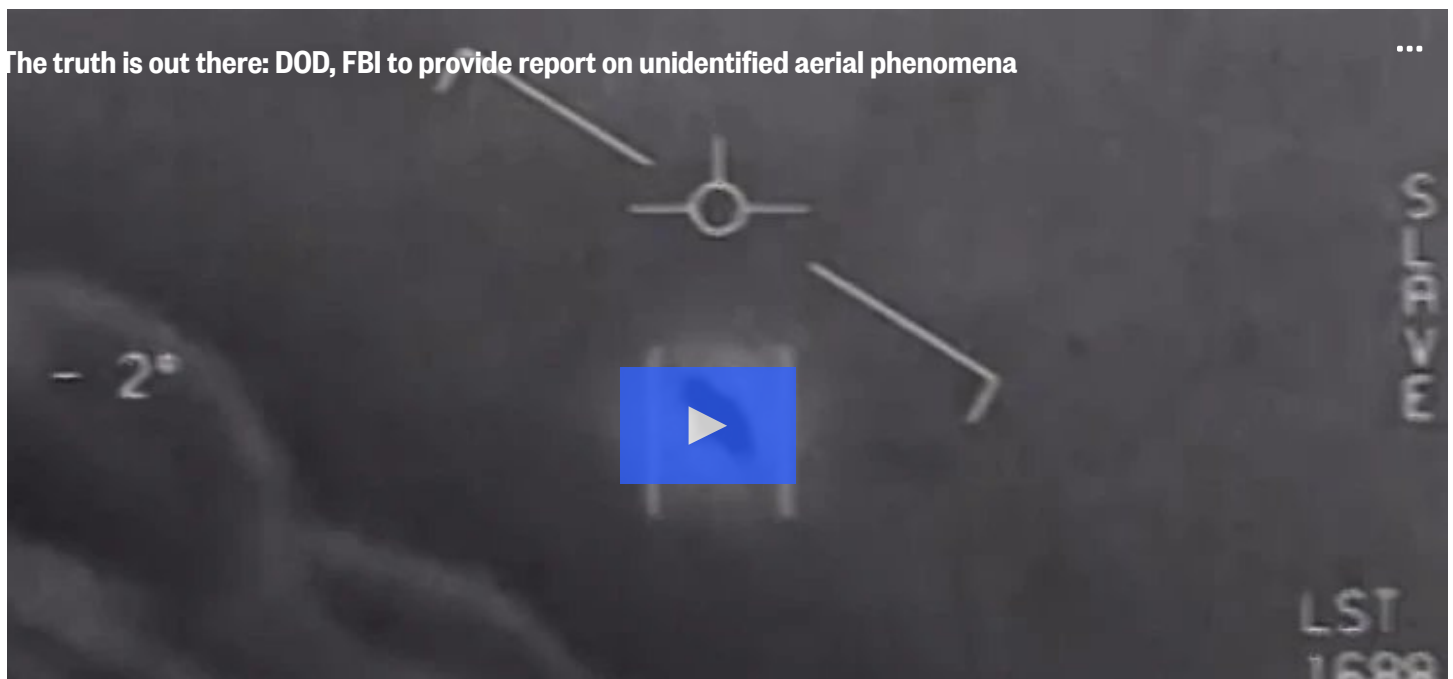
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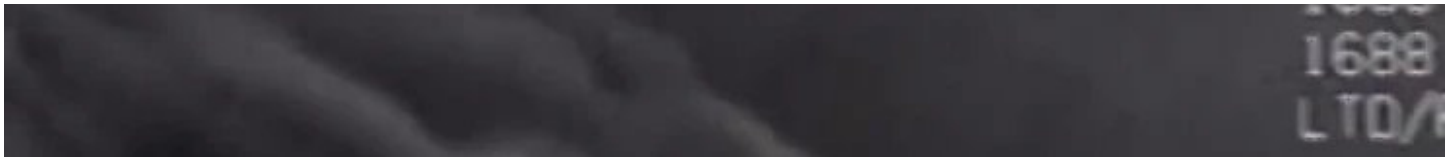
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But you don't have to be a believer to believe that poorly understood things should be investigated, not ignored.

"We don't know if it's extraterrestrial. We don't know if it's an enemy. We don't know if it's an optical phenomenon," said new NASA Administrator Bill Nelson, a former astronaut and Florida senator, in a recent [CNN interview](#). “And so the bottom line is, we want to know.”





Two former CIA directors – [John Brennan](#), who served under Obama, and [James Woolsey](#), who served under Clinton – recently said in separate podcast interviews that they’ve seen evidence of aerial phenomena they can’t explain. [John Ratcliffe](#), who was the director of national intelligence under then-President Donald Trump, told Fox News in March there were “a lot more sightings than have been made public.”

Cold War and fish farts

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, the top Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, pushed the government to conduct the UFO report. For him, it’s a question of national security and understanding whether rivals like China or Russia have developed advanced technology we don’t know about.

“I want us to take it seriously and have a process to take it seriously,” [Rubio told “60 Minutes.”](#)

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For others, like Ravi Kopparapu, a planetary scientist at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center, and Jacob Haqq-Misra, a research scientist with the Blue Marble Space Institute of Science, it’s about discovery.

"For too long, the scientific study of unidentified flying objects and aerial phenomena – UFOs and UAPs, in the shorthand – has been taboo," they wrote in a [Washington Post op-ed](#). "If we want to understand what UAP are, then we need to engage the mainstream scientific community in a concerted effort to study them."

Scharf looks for life on other planets and is a bit tired of people asking him if alien life has visited us on ours, but he said looking more at the skies could yield information about how our own world works.





— A mysterious object hovers over a Navy ship in night vision video. U.S. Navy via @JeremyCorbell

“Stuff like this has a scientific interest not because we're necessarily thinking we're going to find aliens, but maybe there's an unknown phenomenon or a collection of phenomena that are giving rise to some of these sightings,” he said. “There's never been a systematic effort to categorize and catalog stuff that people see, and from the past, we know that some of this stuff sometimes turns out to be interesting.”

The history of science is filled with accidental discoveries and incidents where the hubris of religious or scientific authorities dismissed something as ridiculous that later proved true. [Scientists didn't believe meteorites](#) really came from space until the early 1800s, for instance.

Government secrecy can lead to confusion and misunderstanding that might be cleared up with the help of a wider circle of experts and investigators.

Sweden spent years futilely chasing what it thought were Russian submarines off its coast. But when the navy let civilian researchers listen to a recording of the alleged submarine, they figured out it was actually the sound of [schools of fish farting](#).

Important people have had an interest in UFOs for a long time; they just didn't really talk about it.

Former President Jimmy Carter claimed to have seen a UFO while he was governor of Georgia and even [filed two formal reports](#) of his observations. Former President Ronald Reagan allegedly told people he saw one too while riding in a small plane, according to the pilot, who was [quoted in a book](#) by John Alexander, the former Army colonel whose paranormal investigations were featured in the book and movie “The Men Who Stare at Goats.”

As the Cold War intensified in the 1950s, U.S. officials worried the Soviet Union would use a UFO hoax to drum up fear in the American public. Civilians started seeing what they believed were UFOs

but were actually secret spy planes, like the U-2, so the government settled on a [policy of silence and denial](#).

"Over half of all U.F.O. reports from the late 1950s through the 1960s were accounted for by manned reconnaissance flights," according to a secret CIA study that was declassified in the late 1990s, [The New York Times reported](#) then. "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."

The very real government stonewalling fed bogus conspiracy theories, which came to dominate the study of UFOs and made the topic even more off-putting to serious scholars.

A new generation

In recent years, though, a newer generation of activists has been at center of recent high-profile disclosures thanks to a more professional, careful and credible approach. They include people with serious national security credentials like Christopher Mellon, the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence, and Luis Elizondo, the former Army counterintelligence special agent who led an earlier Pentagon team to investigate UFOs.

The budget for Elizondo's team – a modest \$22 million in the scheme of defense spending – was secured by former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, a powerful ally who has helped drive the resurgence of interest in UFOs.




— An unidentified aerial phenomenon in a U.S. military video.

DoD via To The Stars Academy of Arts & Science

The newer activists have worked with mainstream news outlets to deliver evidence and eye witnesses that meet their high editorial standards and are careful when speaking to general audiences to avoid talking about aliens – though Mellon and Elizondo have appeared on controversial podcaster Joe Rogan’s show as well as "Coast to Coast A.M.," a long-running radio program devoted to conspiracies and the paranormal.

Both the skeptics and the believers don’t expect the Pentagon report to settle anything. Instead, they hope it will start something new.

“The idea of some super powerful aliens coming to visit us is a very compelling story,” West said. “So if you get even a tiny little taste of something like that, it really spices up the story.” 



Alex Seitz-Wald



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