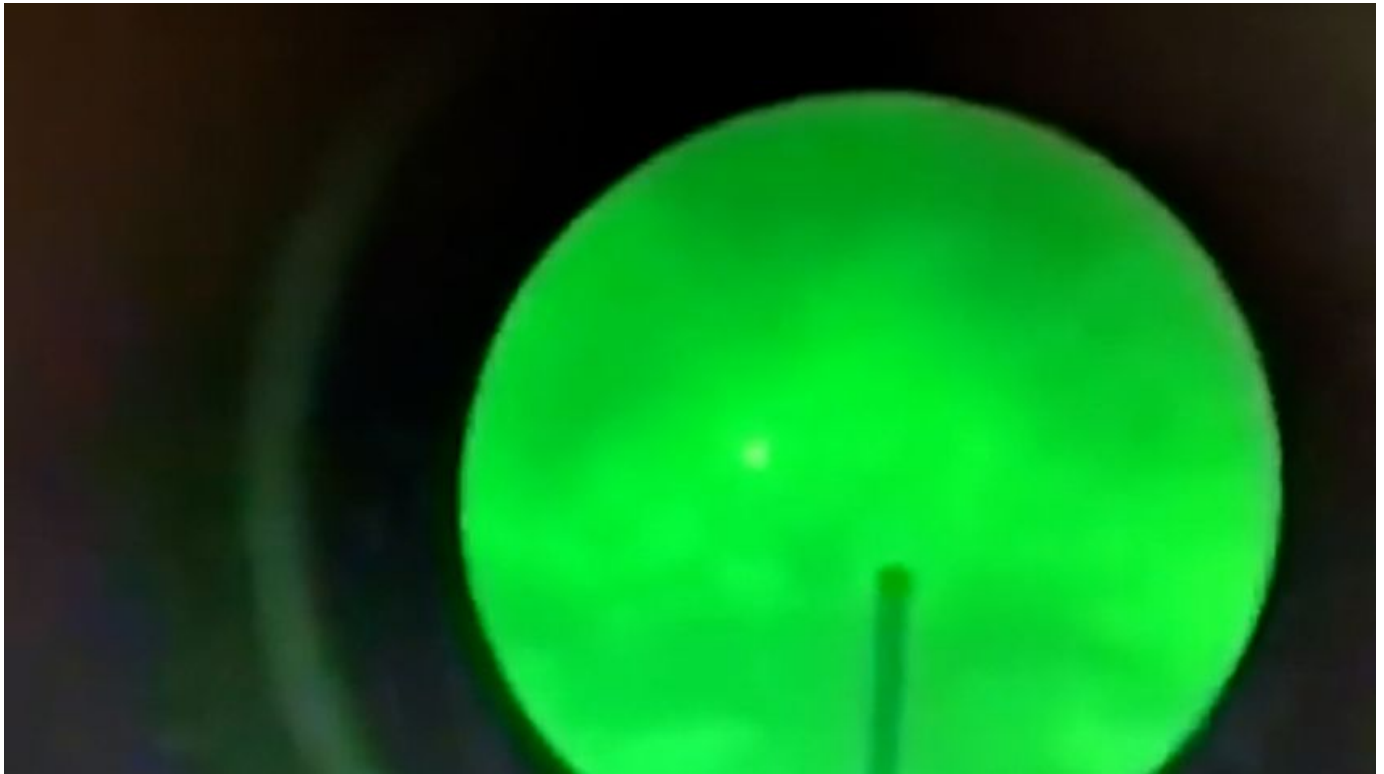


## Opinion: The Pentagon's long hunt for UFOs

Opinion by Erik German and [Peter Bergen](#)

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Hear the details of a new UFO report released by US government

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**Editor's Note:** Erik German is a producer and writer whose work has been published by The New York Times, Time, Frontline, and other publications. Peter Bergen is CNN's national security analyst, a vice president at New America and a professor of practice at Arizona State University. The views expressed in this commentary are their own. View [more opinion](#) on CNN.

**(CNN)** — On Thursday, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence released a congressionally mandated report about “Unidentified Aerial Phenomena,” the preferred Pentagon nomenclature for what most folks call “UFOs.”

This report is part of a relatively new push by the US intelligence community and the Pentagon to try and make sense of more than 500 UFO sightings over the past couple of decades that have mostly been made by US service personnel.

As part of that push, in July the Pentagon established a new office with the wonderfully opaque name of the All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office.

In plain English, this office attempts to figure out what's behind UFO sightings made by Department of Defense personnel or members of the US intelligence community.



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There is a sound national security reason for this office that has nothing to do with aliens or little green men. If there are unidentified objects flying around in US airspace, could these be evidence of American adversaries like Russia or China deploying new kinds of exotic weapons? And whatever these UFOs might be, they could represent a risk to US Air Force planes and commercial aircraft.

The creation of this office is also part of a pattern since the late 1940s when the US Department of Defense has bolstered the case for UFOs – in some cases to disguise top secret new aircraft that the Air Force was developing –while at the same assuring the general public that what some might believe are alien aircraft are explained by more prosaic phenomena such as weather events, or balloons, or airborne debris or good old human error.

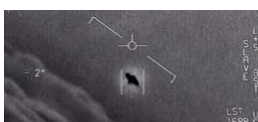
Thursday's new UFO report had some striking findings: The number of UFO sightings dramatically increased between March 2021 and August 2022, during which 247 new sightings were reported. Most of those reports came from pilots or others working for the US Navy and US Air Force.

The report suggests that these increased sightings may be the result of less stigma associated in reporting such sightings and also more guidance from the Pentagon to report “anomalies” in the sky. In other words, if you are instructed to look for something odd, you likely will find it.

## For UFO believers, new report may provide some solace

According to a Gallup poll from 2021, around 40% of Americans believe that unidentified flying objects that are sometimes seen in the sky are, in fact, alien spacecraft.

For UFO true believers, the new report doesn't provide information that would buttress their beliefs, but it leaves open a number of unexplained sightings that UFO believers will surely seize upon.



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In some of the cases that the Pentagon investigated, an unspecified number of UFO sightings were “attributable to sensor irregularities or variances, such as operator or equipment error.”

The Pentagon also found that a very large number of the sightings, 163, were actually balloons or “balloon-like entities,” while 26 were unmanned aircraft systems, otherwise known as drones, and six were attributable to airborne “clutter,” such as plastic bags or birds.

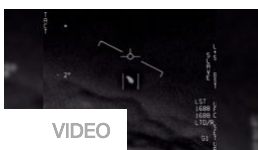
Still, there are 171 unidentified object sightings that the Pentagon hasn’t attributed to anything yet, and some of those objects “demonstrated unusual flight characteristics.”

## The Pentagon’s long, complex history with UFOs

This is not the first time the Pentagon has investigated UFOs and provided information that, in some cases, has helped to fuel the UFO believer movement.

In July 1952, following months of sightings across the US, pilots and ground personnel at Andrews Air Force Base said they spotted unaccountably fast, maneuverable objects flying over Washington, DC. Multiple military witnesses said they’d caught the objects on radar and at least one pilot reported seeing them with the naked eye.

As a result, the officer in charge of US Air Force intelligence, Major General John Samford, held a televised press conference. One US Air Force captain investigating the incident called Samford’s press conference “the largest and longest the Air Force had held since World War II.”



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Seated soberly behind several microphones, Samford told reporters “the great bulk” of UFO sightings could be dismissed as hoaxes, friendly aircraft or aberrations of weather and light. Nevertheless, he said, there remained a certain percentage of reports that have been made by “credible observers of relatively incredible things.”

These relatively incredible possibilities of course inflamed UFO enthusiasts.

Newspapers across the country carried headlines like “Saucers Swarm Over Capitol,” and “Jets Chase DC Sky Ghosts.” One Air Force investigator in 1952 counted more than 16,000 newspaper stories on UFOs that year.

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But less than a year after Samford's press conference, a government panel of scientists, military and intelligence officials convened to study evidence and testimony from more than 20 purported UFO sightings. It concluded that UFOs did indeed pose a strategic threat to the US – but not because of aliens, but rather because America's civil air defense could be overwhelmed by reports of UFOs.

This worry, writes aerospace historian Curtis Peebles, “was not really about flying saucers, it was about Pearl Harbor.” At the height of the Cold War, “the US was haunted by the specter of a surprise Soviet nuclear attack.”

The panel suggested a policy of “debunking” reports and recommended officials take “immediate steps to strip the Unidentified Flying Objects of the special status they have been given and the aura of mystery they have unfortunately acquired.”

The US Air Force tasked a small office called Project Blue Book with doing just that. Until the 1970s, Blue Book officers followed up on UFO reports, interviewed witnesses, collected evidence and consistently put a narrative into the press stressing that most sightings could be attributable to normal aircraft, hoaxers or weather phenomena.

Then, as now, the vast majority of UFO reports easily submitted to conventional explanation.



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But there remained a small group of American UFO-watchers who could not be talked down. And they kept watching the skies, reporting on craft that seemed able to fly higher and faster than any known planes.

In some cases, they were spotting real and very secret US assets. CIA historian Gerald Haines estimated that as many as half of the reports investigated by Project Blue Book were actually sightings of the CIA's U-2 and the Air Force's SR-71 Blackbird spy planes.

The need to protect these and later stealth projects spawned a new approach from some corners of the US counterintelligence community.

“The US Air Force and the CIA had their own working UFO to hide,” writes Mark Pilkington in his book “Mirage Men,” an extensive history of purported UFO sightings. “The finer, fleshier details had been filled in by the imaginations of the people on the ground, encouraged and embellished by...the CIA and others in the alphabet soup of intelligence organizations.”

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Pilkington documented cases in the early 1980s of Air Force counterintelligence agents making contact with UFO investigators and egging them on – even leaking faked evidence of secret contact between the US government and alien visitors. Stories like these inevitably spread. And any useful intelligence about top secret, real life aircraft became lost in increasingly outlandish noise about UFOs.

Pilkington described the Pentagon's communication strategy as “a two-channel system” – one for debunking and calming down the general public when it came to reports of UFOs, the other for hiding potential leaks about top secret US technology.

So where does that leave us today? Perhaps, with the Cold War behind us, the Pentagon's new UFO office signals a new chapter of sensible transparency surrounding aerial unknowns that could pose a threat to our security. But with the Pentagon's long history of whipsawing between stoking and stifling public fascination, it doesn't seem likely that UFO true believers will give up on the mystery any time soon.

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