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We Need to Investigate UFOs—But Without the Distraction of Conspiracy Theories

A former government official calls for investigating unidentified anomalous phenomena without succumbing to conspiracy theories about extraterrestrials

BY [SEAN KIRKPATRICK](#)



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Little else titillates and piques the national interest like unidentified flying objects and space aliens. After more than a century of films featuring intelligent creatures from other worlds, and over seven decades after the U.S. government began investigating them, UFOs remain a flashpoint for conspiracy theorists and science deniers. By any name, UFOs or unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP) conjure the most vivid images and plots allowed by Hollywood and novels alike. Who doesn't want to believe?

However, reality, as inconvenient as it can be, remains fundamental. In 2022 Congress found the courage to put into law the creation of the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), jointly managed by the Department of Defense and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). Its mission is quite straightforward. Apply an unbiased scientific method and intelligence tradecraft to review existing information and data on historical UAP and investigate new data as these are provided to the office from military, federal, state and local entities as well as private citizens.

AARO's underlying raison d'être is to investigate, evaluate, analyze and provide actionable information for use by our national security leadership. Its purpose is not to prove or disprove the existence of extraterrestrial life, but to address the safety and security of our people, our operations and our nation.

Unfortunately, it is also meant to investigate a conspiracy saturated with the distrust between our legislative and executive branches. It is time for the American people to understand that, and for the DoD, ODNI and Congress to step up to the plate and enable AARO to finish its mission absent this distraction.

AARO's interest—[all-domain phenomena](#) (sea, air and space)—remains an ongoing concern to our national security enterprise, particularly when the phenomena are observed near our nation's sensitive military and critical infrastructure facilities. Observations by experienced military personnel as well as data from highly capable sensors are being reviewed by AARO, accordingly, to weed out explainable observations and expose truly difficult-to-explain phenomenology using the most rigorous scientific analysis available. This is its real job: to minimize the risk of intelligence and technical surprise.

Many outside observers [nonetheless have criticized AARO](#) as supposedly part of a continuing government cover-up of the existence of aliens. Interestingly, they have not provided any verifiable evidence of this, nor are some of the more outspoken willing to engage with the office to discuss their positions or offer up the data and evidence they claim to possess. Too often these critics and their supporters rely on secondhand "friend of a cousin" reporting with no personal firsthand knowledge or rigor in their critical thinking. Some claim that those with firsthand knowledge of this supposed cover-up have relayed it to AARO, but no source in my tenure as [director of the office](#) had firsthand knowledge of anything to do with an alleged reverse-engineering program of extraterrestrial spacecraft. While those who came forward have provided valuable information (albeit not of extraterrestrials or cover-ups), those who chose to instead titillate the national interest only stir division and hatred against the credible men and women of AARO who are working faithfully to address this mission. The AARO continues to offer [anyone](#) an opportunity to provide their personal knowledge of an alleged program involving extraterrestrials for the record in a safe and nonadversarial environment. It remains perplexing that some critics are hiding behind their own cloak of secrecy and legal maneuvering, refusing to engage with the AARO when the office has been given full authority by Congress, DoD, ODNI and others in the interagency process to review [all](#) information regardless of its classification while legally protecting those who provide it.

If people claim to have evidence involving aliens, they need to come forward to AARO to enable the office to investigate it. Otherwise, hearsay in a scientific and fact-based investigation serves only as a distraction.

There also is the possibility that some observed and reported phenomena are associated with past or ongoing national security programs completely unrelated to extraterrestrials. Unfortunately, some who have been peripherally involved in these programs are taking advantage of the lack of understanding of security compartmentalization among the public—and some members of Congress—and feel that exposure of national security activities is a public right.

The harm of such exposure would be incalculable: billions of dollars and decades invested in military capabilities exposed to our potential adversaries to satisfy ill-informed curiosity. While some staffers and members of Congress may claim that they and the American people have a right to know of every classified research program, Congress already has an established process for notification of sensitive programs to the bipartisan leadership of both the Senate and House as well as the chairs and ranking minority members of the Senate and House intelligence committees, often referred to as the [Gang of Eight](#). It is incumbent on both the speaker of the House, the Senate majority leader and both chairs of the intelligence committees to ensure that there is no risk of exposing any national security programs in a rush to find extraterrestrials, and that documents are reviewed within appropriate channels. If these members of Congress deem it appropriate not to share classified information, they are doing their job. These are not town hall topics.

Lost in the hyperbole about a government conspiracy to hide the existence of alien spacecraft and physical remains is the real potential that the unexplained phenomena represent a dangerous technological leap by our peer competitors, China and Russia (it could be weapons testing, spying or just technology testing). Such a leap would present a national security crisis. As mandated by Congress, DoD and ODNI must fully engage with and support AARO to ensure that it is receiving the resources and government-wide collaboration required. Likewise, critics of AARO must step up and become part of the solution by collaborating and providing the full disclosure of any and all information they hold.

While future book deals or selling a story to Hollywood may be hard to resist for some, they are not what this effort is about. Sensationalism and the politicization of science do not aid in finding the truth. While everyone wants an answer now, the truth will take time. Physics cannot be reinvented to fit a desired outcome, and analytic conclusions cannot be made based on questionable data and the word of “credible witnesses” alone. And when the data do not fit your theory, the theory is wrong, not the data.

In the multiple reports to Congress that I oversaw, full insight into AARO's methodology, status and results, both unclassified and classified, has been provided. Anyone saying otherwise is not part of the 12 committees that oversee AARO's mission; critics need to learn how access to information within Congress works. If the true issue is the scope of government classification and congressional notification, that should be addressed in the appropriate fora, not by chasing ET. This is a serious, national, fact-based scientific effort to avoid the potential for a grave intelligence failure that could lead to a devastating strategic surprise to our nation. Only science and objective evidentiary-based investigation will prevent that.

This is an opinion and analysis article, and the views expressed by the author or authors are not necessarily those of Scientific American.

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