

Pentagon admits UFO program still exists. But Navy's alien sightings don't quite add up.

The Navy will supposedly make regular reports on at least some of its findings. But disclosure could rob believers of their best piece of evidence — a dearth of good evidence.

An unidentified aerial phenomenon in a U.S. military video. DoD via To The Stars Academy of Arts & Science

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By Seth Shostak

Is it vindication at last? The New York Times has recently reported that a supposedly canceled Pentagon project to investigate strange aerial phenomena is still showing a pulse. The clandestine effort, originally known as the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, was said to have ended in 2012. But, apparently, it's still doing its thing under the auspices of the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence, and with a new name: the Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon Task Force.

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So, where there's smoke, there's fire, right? If the feds are still forking over tax dollars to delve into odd goings-on in the sky, it must be because they've got convincing evidence of extraterrestrial visitors. That's the hope of the 100 million or so Americans who seem willing to swear on the Good Book that unidentified flying objects are, at least in some cases, alien objects.

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But as with everything UFO-related, it's worth taking a second, or third, look before rushing to lay out the red carpet for alien houseguests. When, in 2017, the Times first reported on a secret project to study unidentified aerial phenomena, it was in connection with some puzzling videos taken by Navy fighter pilots over the Pacific. The video showed unidentified objects ahead of the jets, objects that seemed to maneuver in bizarre ways. The military has always wanted to know about anything that can fly, so there are plenty of national security reasons for why they would continue such research.

That's the most straightforward explanation for why the Navy has extended the Pentagon program. It's also what they've said.

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But isn't it possible that what's really going on here is not an investigation into unknown aircraft or drones, but a distraction to keep us from a more disturbing truth — that UFOs aren't enemy flying machines, but alien flying machines? Maybe the government doesn't want to admit this, because they figure the news might throw society into chaos.

Mind you, it's hardly clear why extraterrestrials would travel many trillions of miles through the dangerous voids of space simply to pirouette above our heads and occasionally play cat-and-mouse with the Navy. But — full disclosure — we really don't know what the aliens find interesting to do. Maybe they have their reasons.

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In addition to the persistent interest in strange objects in the sky, it appears that there are also strange objects on the ground. The Times speaks of “retrieved materials” that are “not made on this Earth,” possibly including entire spacecraft. This claim seems both surprising and suspect. The pilots didn't report picking up pieces of alien technology or strange metal alloys (at least not publicly), so it's unclear where these “materials” were found. This is a case where seeing might be believing, but no one has let us see anything. Which is convenient, if less than fully convincing.

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., says he is especially concerned by the fact that the extraterrestrials (if that's what they are) spend a lot of time hanging out above our military bases.

If you're a sci-fi fan, you're well acquainted with the idea that hostile aliens need to pay attention to our armament. Perhaps it's what's lured them to Earth in the first place. They've come as saviors from on high, keen to separate us from our own weapons of mass destruction. That would, at least, be one explanation for their apparent interest in our combat capabilities.

But truth be told, it's a totally *unreasonable* explanation. If the aliens can actually come here — whatever their motivation — then they have technology that's enormously beyond our own. Comparing their weaponry to ours would be like comparing the U.S. Air Force to an *Australopithecus* raiding party. Put another way, do you honestly think “Star Trek's” Captain Jean-Luc Picard would ever spend time checking out piles of slingshots or pikes on some primitive planet when he has phasers back on the USS Enterprise?

If the UFOs are interested in our military, that's actually an argument *against* them being visitors from another star system. Instead, it suggests Russian aircraft, Chinese drones, or something else terrestrial — hardware we could understand.

Humans have always been tempted to ascribe strange phenomena to the workings of superhuman beings, much as the Greeks argued that lightning bolts were javelin tosses by Zeus. But science demands that any hypothesis be supported by detailed, repeatable and impartial observations. Those are lacking here.

The Office of Naval Intelligence will supposedly make regular reports on at least some of its findings. That sort of disclosure sounds as if it would be good news for those who, like Fox Mulder, “want to believe.” But in fact, it might actually work the other way. Disclosure could rob the believers of their best piece of evidence — which is to say, a dearth of good evidence.