

Opinion UFOs

Fri 11 Jun 2021 11:10 BST



This article is more than 1 year old

I study UFOs - and I don't believe the alien hype. Here's why Mick West

This month the Pentagon will release its much-awaited UFO report. Extraterrestrial buffs think they'll be vindicated - but they've gotten a bit ahead of themselves



An image from an unclassified video taken by US Navy pilots depicting 'unidentified aerial phenomena'. Photograph: DoD/AFP/Getty Images

There is a tidal wave of interest building up around an imminent Pentagon report on the subject of UFOs, or, as they are often referred to now, UAPs (Unidentified Aerial Phenomena). A sense of heady enthusiasm has swept over the UFO community, whose members, after suffering years being marginalized as harmless eccentrics, finally feel a sense of vindication and excitement for the coming disclosure.

I'm a science fan, and a science fiction fan. I grew up reading Arthur C Clarke, Poul Anderson, Eric Frank Russell, Robert L Forward and Larry Niven. The idea of contact with aliens has always fascinated me, and I'd like nothing more than to find evidence of extraterrestrial life. But this current flap isn't it.

In 2017 I helped solve a UFO case. Using a hi-tech infrared camera, the Chilean navy had recorded video of a mysterious object in the distance. The black-and-white footage showed a bizarre black shape flying across the sky, and at one point it seemed to emit plumes of hot gases. A special group was formed of military personnel, scientists and other experts. Over two years they carefully studied the case, eliminated all mundane possibilities, and finally concluded that this object was a "genuine unknown". A real UFO, certified by a national military.

The research group released their conclusions and published the enigmatic video. The writer Leslie Kean wrote an effusive article in the Huffington Post lauding the development as a "groundbreaking" and "exceptional" discovery based on video and accounts from, her Chilean government sources said, "highly trained professionals with many years experience" and the "full participation" of academia and the armed forces. The UFO community rejoiced.

Three days later I, and others, identified the plane as Iberia flight 6830, departing Santiago airport. The "hot gases" were just contrails, and the odd movement was the result of a low viewing angle and a powerful zoom factor on the infrared camera. The glare from the engines obscured the plane and created the unusual shape. Radar data confirmed that the exact location of the plane matched the UFO. Case closed. UFO enthusiasts were annoyed.

Something similar seems to be playing out with the current situation with the US navy. UFO enthusiasts claim that there's amazing evidence of UAPs, representing something incredible, and that a special group has been investigating this for years. As with the Chilean case, we are shown blurry video from military-grade infrared cameras as highly compelling evidence that has, apparently, resisted analysis.

But again, when the supposed evidence is subject to public scrutiny, the claims made about it fall away. I, along with many others, have performed deep analysis on the black-and-white videos that have served as backdrops to hundreds of media stories on UFOs. One video, codenamed "Gimbal", seems particularly impressive: it shows what looks like an actual flying saucer skimming over the clouds.

But my experience with the Chilean UFO immediately suggested a more mundane explanation: the infrared glare from the engines of a distant jet. Some investigation confirmed this was a very likely hypothesis. I looked up the camera's patents; these revealed a de-rotation mechanism used to correct for "gimbal roll", which would inevitably mean glares would rotate in the manner seen in the video. This is also probably why the navy gave it the code name "Gimbal", rather than, say, "Flying Saucer".

Other, less impressive videos (which UFO buffs also describe as being remarkable) have quickly succumbed to analysis. "Go Fast" was not actually going fast, and was consistent with a balloon drifting in the wind. "Tic Tac" did not show a craft moving like a ping-pong ball, but instead looked more like a distant plane with the apparent movement caused by the camera switching modes and performing gimbal rolls. "Green Pyramid" looked like "the best UFO footage of all time" for two days, then I pointed out it looked exactly like an out-of-focus airliner shot in night vision with a triangular aperture.

The evidence is underwhelming. We are told there is secret, classified data we can't see that proves something. But the people telling us this are the same people who gushingly promoted these videos as compelling evidence to the media. (Several of the New York Times's much-discussed recent UFO pieces were co-written by Leslie Kean, who was so impressed by the Chilean case.) The History Channel's pop-science television series Unidentified: Inside America's UFO Investigation adopted a similar approach, trotting out "experts" to express amazement and puzzlement at what was ultimately quite explicable.

I expect the Pentagon's forthcoming UAP report to be more of the same. It's a government report, but with no real funding the report will probably rely on work previously done as a pet project of former senator and UFO enthusiast Harry Reid - something the Pentagon does not want to talk about because it's a bit silly.

This is not to say there's nothing for the military to be concerned about. There are real issues regarding unidentified sightings - drones being a major one. A distant drone, even a domestic one, is difficult to identify, and we know foreign adversaries have a strong interest in developing and using novel stealth drones for espionage and probing our defenses. There are other genuine issues, too - like anomalous radar returns and inexplicable eyewitness sightings - but there's no evidence of aliens. There isn't even really any good quality evidence of flying objects displaying amazing technology. There are, however, many people who want UFOs to be "real" and who feel like promoting the story will make it real. They present weak evidence as strong evidence. Don't be fooled.

This article was amended on 13 June 2021 to correct a misspelling of the surname of Arthur C Clarke.

Mick West, a UFO video analyst, is the author of Escaping the Rabbit Hole