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The Pentagon Disinformation That Fueled America's UFO Mythology

U.S. military fabricated evidence of alien technology and allowed rumors to fester to cover up real secret-weapons programs

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A tiny Pentagon office had spent months investigating conspiracy theories about secret Washington UFO programs when it uncovered a shocking truth: At least one of those theories had been fueled by the Pentagon itself.

The congressionally ordered probe took investigators back to the 1980s, when an Air Force colonel visited a bar near Area 51, a top-secret site in the Nevada desert. He gave the owner photos of what might be flying saucers. The photos went up on the walls, and into the local lore went the idea that the U.S. military was secretly testing recovered alien technology.

But the colonel was on a mission—of disinformation. The photos were doctored, the now-retired officer confessed to the Pentagon investigators in 2023. The whole exercise was a ruse to protect what was really going on at Area 51: The Air Force was using the site to develop top-secret stealth fighters, viewed as a critical edge against the Soviet Union. Military leaders were worried that the programs might get exposed if locals somehow glimpsed a test flight of, say, the F-117 stealth fighter, an aircraft that truly did look out of this world. Better that they believe it came from Andromeda.

This episode, reported now for the first time, was just one of a series of discoveries the Pentagon team made as it investigated decades of claims that Washington was hiding what it knew about extraterrestrial life. That effort culminated in [a report, released last year by the Defense Department](#), that found allegations of a government coverup to be baseless.

In fact, a Wall Street Journal investigation reveals, the report itself amounted to a coverup—but not in the way the UFO conspiracy industry would have people believe. The public disclosure left out the truth behind some of the foundational myths about UFOs: The Pentagon itself sometimes deliberately fanned the flames, in what amounted to the U.S. government targeting its own citizens with disinformation.

At the same time, the very nature of Pentagon operations—an opaque bureaucracy that kept secret programs embedded within secret programs, cloaked in cover stories—created fertile ground for the myths to spread.

These findings represent a stunning new twist in the story of America's cultural obsession with UFOs. In the decades after a 1938 radio broadcast of H.G. Wells' "The War of the Worlds" spread panic throughout the country, speculation about alien visitors remained largely the province of supermarket tabloids, Hollywood blockbusters and costumed conferences in Las Vegas.

More recently, things took an ominous turn when a handful of former Pentagon officials went public with allegations of a government program to exploit extraterrestrial technology and hide it from Americans. Those claims led to the Pentagon's investigation.

Now, evidence is emerging that government efforts to propagate UFO mythology date back all the way to the 1950s.

This account is based on interviews with two dozen current and former U.S. officials, scientists and military contractors involved in the inquiry, as well as thousands of pages of documents, recordings, emails and text messages.

At times, as with the deception around Area 51, military officers spread false documents to create a smokescreen for real secret-weapons programs. In other cases, officials allowed UFO myths to take root in the interest of national security—for instance, to prevent the Soviet Union from detecting vulnerabilities in the systems protecting nuclear installations. Stories tended to take on a life of their own, such as the three-decade journey of a purported piece of space metal that turned out to be nothing of the sort. And one long-running practice was more like a fraternity hazing ritual that spun wildly out of control.

Investigators are still trying to determine whether the spread of disinformation was the act of local commanders and officers or a more centralized, institutional program.

The Pentagon omitted key facts in the public version of the 2024 report that could have helped put some UFO rumors to rest, both to protect classified secrets and to avoid embarrassment, the Journal investigation found. The Air Force in particular pushed to omit some details it believed could jeopardize secret programs and damage careers.

The lack of full transparency has only given more fuel to conspiracy theories. Members of Congress have formed a caucus, composed mainly of Republicans, to examine unidentified anomalous phenomena, or UAP, in bureaucratic speak. The caucus has demanded the intelligence community disclose which agencies "are involved with UAP crash retrieval programs."

MAGA skepticism about the "deep state" further feeds the notion that government bureaucrats have been keeping those secrets from the American public. At a November hearing of two House Oversight subcommittees, Rep. Nancy Mace, a Republican from South Carolina, cast doubt on the Pentagon's report. "I'm not a mathematician, but I can tell you that doesn't add up," she said.

'Stupid enough'

Sean Kirkpatrick, a precise, bespectacled scientist who once spent years studying vibrations in laser crystals, was nearing retirement from government service when he received the call that would change his life.

By 2022 he had ascended to chief scientist at the Missile and Space Intelligence Center at the Redstone Arsenal near Huntsville, Ala. As he sat at his desk at 6:30 one morning, drinking coffee and skimming through intelligence reports that had come in overnight, his Tandberg desk phone—essentially a classified version of FaceTime—rang.

It was a deputy undersecretary from the Pentagon, who was putting on a tie as he told Kirkpatrick about a new office Congress ordered the department to set up to examine unidentified anomalous phenomena. "The undersecretary and I put together a shortlist of who could do it, and you're at the top," the official relayed, adding that they had settled on Kirkpatrick because he both had a scientific background and had built a half-dozen organizations within the intelligence community.

Is that the real reason, Kirkpatrick countered, "or am I the only one stupid enough to say, 'yes?'"

In short order, Kirkpatrick had the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office up and running. Just the latest in an alphabet soup of special government projects set up to study UFOs stretching back more than half a century, AARO, as it is known, operated out of an unmarked office near the Pentagon, with a few dozen staffers and a classified budget.

The mission fell into two buckets. One was to collect data on sightings, particularly around military installations, and assess whether they could be explained by earthly technology. Amid growing public attention, the number of such reports has skyrocketed in recent years, to 757 in the 12 months after May 2023 from 144 between 2004 to 2021. AARO linked most of the incidents to balloons, birds and the proliferation of drones cluttering the skies.

Many pilot accounts of floating orbs were actually reflections of the sun from Starlink satellites, investigators found. They are still examining whether some unexplained events could be foreign technology, such as Chinese aircraft using next-generation cloaking methods that distort their appearance.

The office found that some seemingly inexplicable events weren't so strange after all. In one, a 2015 video appeared to show a spherical object buzzing past a jet fighter at an almost impossible speed. "Oh, my gosh dude," the pilot can be heard saying in the video, laughing. But later, investigators determined there was nothing much to see—whatever the object was, the camera angle and relative speed of the jet had made it appear to be going much faster than it was.

The office's second mission proved to be more peculiar: to review the historical record [going back to 1945](#) to assess the claims made by dozens of former military employees that Washington operated a secret program to harvest alien technology. Congress granted the office unprecedented access to America's most highly classified programs to allow Kirkpatrick's team to run the stories to ground.

As Kirkpatrick pursued his investigation, he started to uncover a hall of mirrors within the Pentagon, cloaked in official and nonofficial cover. On one level, the secrecy was understandable. The U.S., after all, had been locked in an existential battle with the Soviet Union for decades, each side determined to win the upper hand in the race for ever-more-exotic weapons.

But Kirkpatrick soon discovered that some of the obsession with secrecy verged on the farcical. A former Air Force officer was visibly terrified when he told Kirkpatrick's investigators that he had been briefed on a secret alien project decades earlier, and was warned that if he ever repeated the secret he could be jailed or executed. The claim would be repeated to investigators by other men who had never spoken of the matter, even with their spouses.

It turned out the witnesses had been victims of a bizarre hazing ritual.

For decades, certain new commanders of the Air Force's most classified programs, as part of their induction briefings, would be handed a piece of paper with a photo of what looked like a flying saucer. The craft was described as an antigravity maneuvering vehicle.

The officers were told that the program they were joining, dubbed Yankee Blue, was part of an effort to reverse-engineer the technology on the craft. They were told never to mention it again. Many never learned it was fake. Kirkpatrick found the practice had begun decades before, and appeared to continue still. The defense secretary's office sent a memo out across the service in the spring of 2023 ordering the practice to stop immediately, but the damage was done.

Investigators are still trying to determine why officers had misled subordinates, whether as some type of loyalty test, a more deliberate attempt to deceive or something else.

After that 2023 discovery, Kirkpatrick's deputy briefed President Joe Biden's director of national intelligence, Avril Haines, who was stunned.

Could this be the basis for the persistent belief that the U.S. has an alien program that we've concealed from the American people? Haines wanted to know, according to people familiar with the matter. How extensive was it? she asked.

The official responded: "Ma'am, we know it went on for decades. We are talking about hundreds and hundreds of people. These men signed NDAs. They thought it was real."

The finding could have been devastating to the Air Force. The service was particularly sensitive to the allegations of hazing and asked that AARO hold off on including the finding in the public report, even after Kirkpatrick had briefed lawmakers on the episode. Kirkpatrick retired before that report was finished and released.

In a statement, a Defense Department spokeswoman acknowledged that AARO had uncovered evidence of fake classified program materials relating to extraterrestrials, and had briefed lawmakers and intelligence officials. The spokeswoman, Sue Gough, said the department didn't include that information in its report last year because the investigation wasn't completed, but expects to provide it in another report scheduled for later this year.

"The department is committed to releasing a second volume of its Historical Record Report, to include AARO's findings on reports of potential pranks and inauthentic materials," Gough said.

A bunker in Montana

Kirkpatrick investigated another mystery that stretched back 60 years.

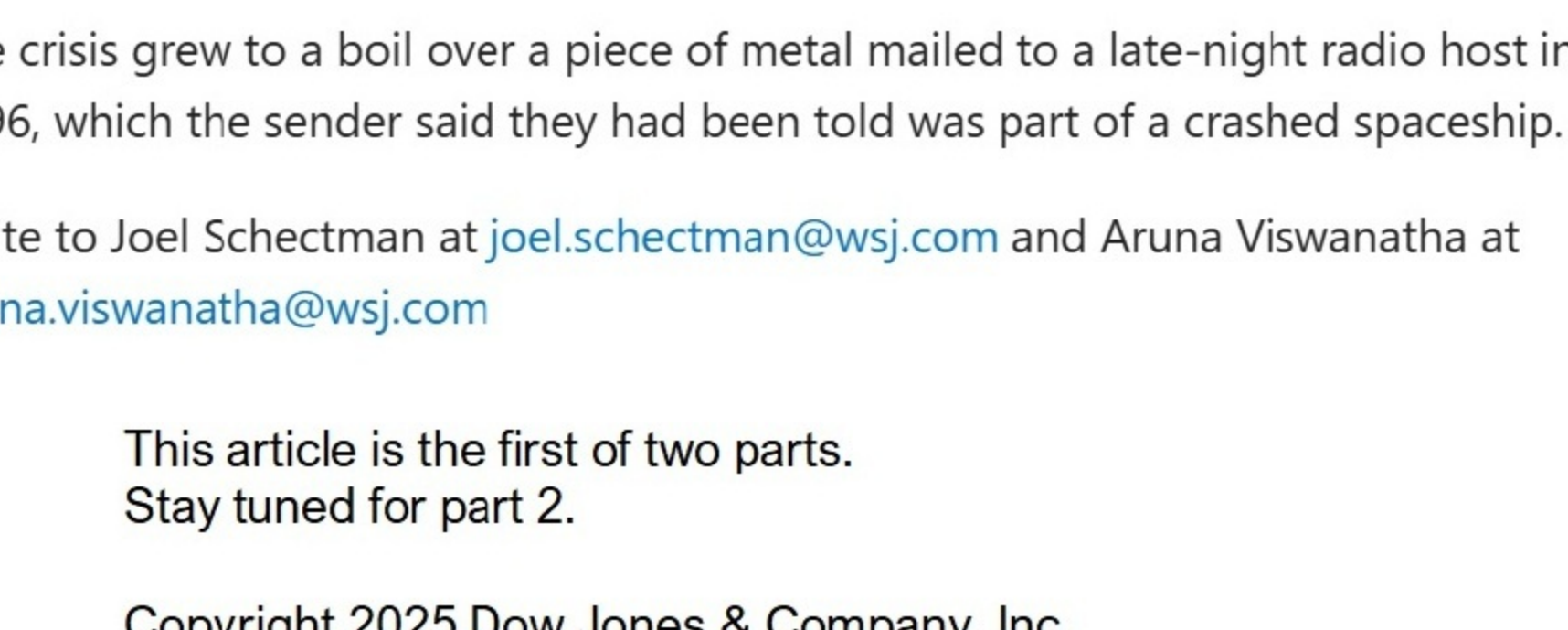
In 1967, Robert Salas, now 84, was an Air Force captain sitting in a walk-in closet-sized bunker, manning the controls of 10 nuclear missiles in Montana.

He was prepared to launch apocalyptic strikes should Soviet Russia ever attack first, and got a call around 8 p.m. one night from the guard station above. A glowing reddish-orange oval was hovering over the front gate, Salas told Kirkpatrick's investigators. The guards had their rifles drawn, pointed at the oval object appearing to float above the gate. A horn sounded in the bunker, signaling a problem with the control system: All 10 missiles were disabled.

Salas soon learned a similar event occurred at other silos nearby. Were they under attack? Salas never got an answer. The next morning a helicopter was waiting to take Salas back to base. Once there he was ordered: Never discuss the incident.

Salas was one of five men interviewed by Kirkpatrick's team who witnessed such events in the 1960s and '70s. While sworn to secrecy, the men began sharing their stories in the '90s in books and documentaries.

Kirkpatrick's team dug into the story and discovered a terrestrial explanation. The barriers of concrete and steel surrounding America's nuclear missiles were thick enough to give them a chance if hit first by a Soviet strike. But scientists at the time feared the intense storm of electromagnetic waves generated by a nuclear detonation might render the hardware needed to launch a counterstrike unusable.



A model of an electromagnetic pulse testing site, shown in a 1978 Pentagon document.

To test this vulnerability, the Air Force developed an exotic electromagnetic generator that simulated this pulse of disruptive energy without the need to detonate a nuclear weapon.

When activated, this device, placed on a portable platform 60 feet above the facility, would gather power until it glowed, sometimes with a blinding orange light. It would then fire a burst of energy that could resemble lightning.

A.2.1 Inverse-Cone Structure. This structure starts at the end of the bicone with a diameter equal to the bicone and then linearly decreases in diameter throughout its length. Figure 90 is a sketch of such a structure.

Figure 90 Sketch of inverse cone structure.

A 1973 Pentagon document diagrams a close-up of the part of the equipment that fires an electromagnetic wave that can appear like a bolt of lightning during the test.

The electromagnetic pulses snaked down cables connected to the bunker where launch commanders like Salas sat, disrupting the guidance systems, disabling the weapons and haunting the men to this day.

But any public leak of the tests at the time would have allowed Russia to know that America's nuclear arsenal could be disabled in a first strike. The witnesses were kept in the dark.

To this day Salas believes he was party to an intergalactic intervention to stop nuclear war which the government has tried to hide. He is half right. The experience left the octogenarian deeply skeptical of the U.S. military and its ability to tell the truth. "There is a gigantic coverup, not only by the Air Force, but every other federal agency that has cognizance of this subject," he said in an interview with the Journal. "We were never briefed on the activities that were going on, the Air Force shut us out of any information."

Concealing the truth from men like Salas and deliberate efforts to target the public with disinformation unleashed within the halls of the Pentagon itself a dangerous force, which would become almost unstoppable as decades passed. The paranoid mythology the U.S. military helped spread now has a hold over a growing number of its own senior officials who count themselves as believers.

The crisis grew to a boil over a piece of metal mailed to a late-night radio host in 1996, which the sender said they had been told was part of a crashed spaceship.

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This article is the first of two parts.
Stay tuned for part 2.

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