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DEFENSE

The Pentagon's Secret Search for UFOs

Funded at the request of Harry Reid, the program probed a number of encounters military pilots had with aircraft they believed didn't operate like anything they had seen before.

By **BRYAN BENDER** | December 16, 2017

The Pentagon, at the direction of Congress, a decade ago quietly set up a multi-million dollar program to investigate what are popularly known as unidentified flying objects—UFOs.

The “unidentified aerial phenomena” claimed to have been seen by pilots and other military personnel appeared vastly more advanced than those in American or foreign arsenals. In some cases they maneuvered so unusually and so fast that they seemed to defy the laws of physics, according to multiple sources directly involved in or briefed on the effort and a review of unclassified Defense Department and congressional documents.

The Advanced Aviation Threat Identification Program, whose existence was not classified but operated with the knowledge of an extremely limited number of officials, was the brainchild of then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada), who first secured the appropriation to begin the program in 2009 with the support of the late Senators Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) and Republican Ted Stevens (R-

Alaska), two World War II veterans who were similarly concerned about the potential national security implications, the sources involved in the effort said. The origins of the program, the existence of which the Pentagon confirmed on Friday, are being revealed publicly for the first time by POLITICO and the New York Times in nearly simultaneous reports on Saturday.

One possible theory behind the unexplained incidents, according to a former congressional staffer who described the motivations behind the program, was that a foreign power—perhaps the Chinese or the Russians—had developed next-generation technologies that could threaten the United States.

“Was this China or Russia trying to do something or has some propulsion system we are not familiar with?” said a former staffer who spoke with POLITICO on condition of anonymity.

The revelation of the program could give a credibility boost to UFO theorists, who have long pointed to public accounts by military pilots and others describing phenomena that defy obvious explanation, and could fuel demands for increased transparency about the scope and findings of the Pentagon effort, which focused some of its inquiries into sci-fi sounding concepts like "wormholes" and "warp drives." The program also drafted a series of what the office referred to as "queried unverified event under evaluation," QUEU reports, in which pilots and other personnel who had reported encounters were interviewed about their experiences.

Reid initiated the program, which ultimately spent more than \$20 million, through an earmark after he was persuaded in part by aerospace titan and hotel chain founder Bob Bigelow, a friend and fellow Nevadan who owns Bigelow Aerospace, a space technology company and government contractor. Bigelow, whose company received some of the research contracts, was also a regular contributor to Reid's re-election campaigns, campaign finance records show, at least \$10,000 between 1998 and 2008. Bigelow has spoken openly in recent years about his views that extraterrestrial visitors frequently travel to Earth. He also purchased the Skinwalker Ranch in Utah, the subject of intense interest among believers in UFOs. Reid and Bigelow did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

ADVERTISING

According to a Pentagon official, the AATIP program was ended “in the 2012 timeframe,” but it has recently attracted attention because of the resignation in early October of Luis Elizondo, the career intelligence officer who ran the initiative. In his resignation letter, addressed to Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Elizondo said the efforts of his program were not being taken sufficiently seriously. The Pentagon official could not confirm Mattis had actually seen the letter.

“We tried to work within the system,” Elizondo told POLITICO in a recent interview. “We were trying to take the voodoo out of voodoo science.”

He described scores of unexplained sightings by Navy pilots and other observers of aircraft with capabilities far beyond what is currently considered aerodynamically possible. The sightings, Elizondo told POLITICO, were often reported in the vicinity of nuclear facilities, either ships at sea or power plants. “We had never seen anything like it.”

But, in his view military leadership did not appear alarmed by the potential threat. “If a Russian ‘Bear’ bomber comes in near California, it is all over the news,” he said. “These are coming in the skies over our facilities. Nothing but crickets.”

Shortly after his resignation, Elizondo was listed as one of the key players in a for-profit company called To The Stars Academy of Arts and Sciences, co-founded by Tom DeLonge, an entertainment mogul and former guitarist and vocalist for the rock band Blink-182. An April 2016 profile of DeLonge in “Rolling Stone” magazine described his fascination with theories about extraterrestrial space travel as an “obsession.”

In a video advertising the company, DeLonge describes To The Stars as a “public benefit corporation” that has “mobilized a team of the most experienced, connected and passionately curious minds from the U.S. intelligence community, including the CIA, Department of Defense, who have been operating under the shadows of top-secrecy for decades.”

The founders say they believe “there is sufficient credible evidence of UAP [unidentified aerial phenomenon] that proves exotic technologies exist that could revolutionize the human experience.”

The goal of the academy’s researchers, it says on its website, is “to use their expertise and credibility to bring transformative science and engineering out of the shadows and collaborate with global citizens to apply that knowledge in a way that benefits humanity,” adding “without government restrictions.”

Also helping drive the effort is Chris Mellon, a former Democratic staff director for the Senate Intelligence Committee and former deputy assistant secretary of defense for intelligence. Other members of the company include a former high-level CIA official and the former director of advanced systems at Lockheed Martin’s super-secret Skunk Works facility in California.

“I think we’re all frustrated by the fact that our government and science neglects some of the most interesting and provocative and potentially important issues out there,” Mellon says in the video.

POLITICO learned of the Pentagon program earlier this fall, shortly after Mellon and his colleagues rolled out their new private effort, which is now seeking investors with a minimum purchase of \$200 in common stock shares. Its website claims 2,142 investors, who have purchased slightly more than \$2 million worth of shares.

At a recent press conference for To The Stars in Las Vegas, Mellon described one of the sightings reported by U.S. Navy pilots: "It is white, oblong, some 40 feet long and perhaps 12 feet thick...The pilots are astonished to see the object suddenly reorient itself toward the approaching F/A-18. In a series of discreet tumbling maneuvers that seem to defy the laws of physics. The object takes a position directly behind the approaching F/A-18. The pilots capture gun camera footage and infrared imagery of the object. They are outmatched by a technology they've never seen."

"They did not exhibit overt hostility," Elizondo, listed as director of global security and special programs for To The Stars, explained in a recent published interview of the series of reported encounters. "But something unexplained is always assumed to be a potential threat until we are certain it isn't. On the bright side, I believe we are closer than ever before in our understanding of how it operates."

The Pentagon's AATIP program marked a 21st century effort to replicate some of the decades of inconclusive research undertaken by the Pentagon in 1950s and 1960s to try to explain thousands of reported sightings of unidentified flying objects, or UFOs by military and civilian pilots and average citizens—particularly an effort known as Project Bluebook that ran from 1947 to 1969 and still a focus of intense interest for UFO researchers.

The more recent effort, which was established inside the Defense Intelligence Agency, compiled "reams of paperwork," but little else, the former staffer said.

Pentagon spokeswoman Dana White confirmed to POLITICO that the program existed and was run by Elizondo. But she could not say how long he was in charge of it and declined to answer detailed questions about the office or its work, citing concerns about the closely held nature of the program.

"The Advanced Aviation Threat Identification Program ended in the 2012 timeframe," White said. "It was determined that there were other, higher priority issues that merited funding and it was in the best interest of the DoD to make a change."

White added: "The DoD takes seriously all threats and potential threats to our people, our assets, and our mission and takes action whenever credible information is developed."

But some who were aware of the effort in its earliest days were uncomfortable with the aims of the program, unnerved by the implication that the incidents involved aircraft that were not made by humans.

"I thought it was a little bizarre at the time," recalled a former senior intelligence official who knew about Reid's role first-hand. He asked those in the know: "Tell me what this is, and what we are doing and what is going on and that we aren't doing something that is nonsense here."

“I was concerned the money was being funneled through is to somebody else who was an associate of Harry Reid’s,” added the former official, who asked not to be identified. “The whole circle was kind of a bizarre piece.”

Reid enlisted the support of Inouye, then chairman of the powerful Appropriations Committee, as well as Stevens, who two sources involved in the effort were told had related to Reid that as a pilot he had personally witnessed similar unexplained aerial phenomenon.

There was also interest among some analysts at the DIA who were concerned that the Russians or Chinese might have developed some more advanced systems. Reid’s views on the subject were also shaped by a book about the Skinwalker Ranch, co-authored by his acquaintance George Knapp, the former congressional staffer said.

“When this was brought to Senator Reid he said, “There is enough here and I am obligated if this is a national security issue to invest some money in this,” he explained. “Stevens and Inouye agreed with this.”

“I still remember coming back from that meeting and thinking of the implications of what Reid said,” the former senior official said. “I remember being concerned about this. I wanted to make sure it was supervised and we were using the appropriation to do actual research on real threats to the United States.

He said he was assured that the research being done was valid. “It was not a rogue individual out of control.”

The former staffer said that eventually, however, even Reid agreed it was not worth continuing.

“After a while the consensus was we really couldn’t find anything of substance,” he recalled. “They produced reams of paperwork. After all of that there was really nothing there that we could find. It all pretty much dissolved from that reason alone—and the interest level was losing steam. We only did it a couple years.”

“There was really nothing there that we could justify using taxpayer money,” he added. “We let it die a slow death. It was well spent money in the beginning.”

Theodoric Meyer and Gabriel DeBenedetti contributed reporting.