

"UFOs exist and everyone needs to adjust to that fact." (Dis)Information Campaigns on the UFO Phenomenon

ANDREAS ANTON, FABIAN VUGRIN¹

Abstract – “UFOs exist and everyone needs to adjust to that fact” was the headline of the renowned U.S. daily newspaper *Washington Post* on May 28, 2019. The basic message of the article is that in the wake of recent releases of various U.S. military information on the UFO issue, there could no longer be any doubts about the reality of the UFO phenomenon (in the sense of unidentified flying objects with anomalous characteristics). This positioning differs in a significant way from the usual reporting of important leading media in the USA on the UFO topic for decades. However, the *Washington Post* article does not stand alone, but is part of a whole wave of media events related to the UFO phenomenon that have attracted much attention in the U.S. and worldwide since late 2017. Among other things, it became known that the U.S. military intelligence agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), maintained a secret UFO research program called the *Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program* (AATIP) from 2007 to 2012. This article sheds light on the background of the events and, with a view to historical PR campaigns and intelligence activities in connection with the UFO topic in the USA, endeavors to critically assess and contextualize the current situation. The focus is on the question of whether a targeted disinformation campaign could be behind the current reporting.

Keywords: UFOs – UAPs – disinformation – Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program – To The Stars Academy

1 **Andreas Anton** studied sociology, history and cognitive science at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany. He completed his doctorate in sociology in the German Research Foundation (DFG)-funded project “In the Shadow of Scientism. On dealing with heterodox knowledge, experiences and practices in the GDR.” Since 2017, he is a research associate at the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health (IGPP) in Freiburg. E-Mail: anton@igpp.de

Fabian Vugrin studied political and administrational science at the University of Konstanz, Germany. He is currently pursuing his master’s degree in interdisciplinary anthropology at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. Since 2022 he is a student assistant at the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health (IGPP) in Freiburg. E-Mail: fabian.vugrin@pluto.uni-freiburg.de

**“UFOs existieren, und jeder muss sich auf diese Tatsache einstellen.“
(Des-)Informationskampagnen über das UFO-Phänomen**

Zusammenfassung – “UFOs exist and everyone needs to adjust to that fact” titelte die renommierte US-amerikanische Tageszeitung *Washington Post* am 28. Mai 2019. Die Grundaussage des Artikels besteht darin, dass im Zuge der jüngsten Veröffentlichungen verschiedener Informationen des US-Militärs zur UFO-Thematik keine Zweifel mehr an der Realität des UFO-Phänomens (im Sinne von unidentifizierten Flugobjekten mit anomalen Charakteristika) bestehen könnten. Diese Positionierung unterscheidet sich in erheblicher Weise von der über Jahrzehnte üblichen Berichterstattung wichtiger Leitmedien in den USA zum UFO-Thema. Der *Washington-Post*-Artikel steht jedoch nicht alleine, sondern ist Bestandteil einer ganzen Welle von medialen Ereignissen im Zusammenhang mit dem UFO-Phänomen, die seit Ende 2017 in den USA und weltweit viel Aufmerksamkeit erregt haben. Unter anderem wurde bekannt, dass der militärische US-Geheimdienst Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) von 2007 bis 2012 ein geheimes UFO-Forschungsprogramm mit der Bezeichnung *Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program* (AATIP) unterhielt. Der Artikel beleuchtet die Hintergründe der Ereignisse und bemüht sich mit Blick auf historische PR-Kampagnen und Geheimdienst-Aktivitäten im Zusammenhang mit dem UFO-Thema in den USA um eine kritische Einschätzung und Kontextualisierung der aktuellen Situation. Im Vordergrund steht dabei die Frage, ob hinter der aktuellen Berichterstattung eine gezielte Desinformationskampagne stehen könnte.

Schlüsselbegriffe: UFOs – UAPs – Desinformation – Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program – To The Stars Academy

Threat from outer space

On October 30, 1938 – one day before Halloween – the American radio station CBS broadcasted a radio play based on the 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds* by Herbert George Wells. The book, which is now considered a classic of science fiction literature, is about an invasion of Great Britain by technically far superior Martians – from where they plan to conquer the entire Earth and exploit its raw materials. As soon as they land on Earth, the Martians destroy cities, roads and communication networks with three-legged fighting machines, so-called “Tripods.” The humans are desperately inferior in terms of technology and have no chance against the alien attackers. Finally, humanity is saved by the aliens being infected and killed by earthly bacteria. For the radio play on CBS, the action was moved from the UK to the U.S. and the story was told in the form of a fictional live report informing about the actual events of the alien invasion. Although there were several indications that it was a fictional plot, some listeners mistook the story for a real alien attack and panicked. The report in the next day’s newspapers that it had come to a downright mass panic during the broadcast, turned out afterwards to be

a strong exaggeration of the press. Nevertheless, the transmission had an enormous effect: In several police stations the telephone lines broke down, frightened people ran around on roads protecting themselves with cloths face-coverings against the “poison gas” of the extraterrestrial invaders. A priest gave a sermon on “Judgment Day” and some men called the authorities inquiring where to join the armed resistance against the aliens. The reactions to the radio play of *The War of the Worlds* are noteworthy: Apparently the idea of the existence of extraterrestrial civilizations was not only widespread in the United States in 1938, but an attack by extraterrestrial invaders was also considered a *real possibility* by at least some listeners of the CBS radio broadcast. This, in turn, alerted U.S. authorities: The UFO issue had the potential to trigger collective fears and even mass panic (Gerritzen, 2016: 13–20). The CBS radio broadcast from 1938 represents a key scene to understand the importance of the UFO topic in the USA.

The ‘UFO Year’ 1947

Beginning in February 1946, reports of sightings of unusual spherical or cigar-shaped flying objects over Sweden, Finland, and Norway began to accumulate. These objects were referred to in the press as “ghost rockets” because they reminded some observers of the shape of the German V rockets. In Sweden alone, some 1,000 sightings were reported by the end of 1946. The events made headlines in Europe and the United States for weeks. To this day, it has not been conclusively explained what caused the sightings. Various Western intelligence agencies investigated the incidents and suspected the Soviet Union of using novel military aircraft over Scandinavia (Anton, 2019: 134–135). At the same time, reports of sightings of mysterious celestial phenomena – some of them close to military facilities – were also accumulating in the United States, leading to a nervousness among the U.S. military. In addition to the question of whether the Soviet Union had technically sophisticated aircraft that were intruding into American airspace, there was also the suspicion that the UFO issue could be used by the enemy as some sort of *psychological warfare* to create fear and confusion among the population. The mood was further fueled by the famous UFO sighting of amateur pilot Kenneth Arnold on June 24, 1947. Arnold reported seeing nine unusual flying objects in the clouds during a flight near Mount Rainier in Washington State, which were later described in the press as “saucer-like aircraft” or “shaped like saucers.” Thus, the term “flying saucer” was born. Subsequently, there was a nationwide wave of UFO sightings and the newspapers were full of reports on the subject. Arnold’s sighting can be considered the beginning of the modern UFO phenomenon. Thomas Bullard notes in this regard:

Kenneth Arnold’s report of nine objects skipping over the slopes of Mount Rainier on June 24, 1947, marks the nominal beginning of the UFO era. In a sense his sighting comes as just one among ongoing streams of predecessors and successors, and being chosen as

the “first” is as arbitrary as pulling one person out of a line to celebrate the millionth customer of a supermarket. If unidentified flying objects did not begin with Arnold’s report, the social debut of UFOs certainly did. His report crystallized a coherent mystery out of random observations, gave it a catchy name and captivated public interest. (Bullard, 2010: 52–53)

Arnold’s sighting was investigated by the U.S. Air Force and evaluated as a mirage. That same year, a period of military interest in the UFO phenomenon began – mainly by the Air Force, entrusted with securing the airspace over the United States. From 1947 to 1969, official investigations of UFOs were initiated several times: The projects *Sign* and *Grudge* worked for one and three years respectively and *Project Blue Book* finally collected data and conducted analyses over 17 years. The goal of all these projects was to determine whether UFOs posed a threat to U.S. national security. Registration offices for UFO observations made by the population were established and Air Force personnel were instructed via corresponding guidelines to forward information and materials related to UFOs to special military agencies (Anton & Ammon, 2015: 334).

However, the year 1947 was a significant year in respect to the UFO topic for another reason. In 1947, the so-called *Roswell Incident* took place, which plays an important role in various conspiracy theories on the UFO phenomenon to this day (see for example: Carey & Schmitt 2019). On June 14, 1947, rancher William Brazel found mysterious debris on the grounds of a ranch (about 105 kilometers northwest of the small town of Roswell, New Mexico). Shortly thereafter, Brazel learned – in connection with Kenneth Arnold’s sighting – of the flying saucer phenomenon from the press and reported his find to the sheriff of Roswell. He in turn informed the *Roswell Army Air Field* (RAAF), a U.S. Army base near Roswell. The *509th Composite Group* air force unit, which had been used to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, had been stationed there since 1945. The Army examined the debris Brazel found and told the press they had recovered parts of a flying saucer. Thus, the *Roswell Daily Record* was published on July 8, 1947 with the headline: “RAAF Captures Flying Saucer On Ranch In Roswell Region” (*Roswell Daily Record* – July 8, 1947).² However, on the same day the report was retracted and the next day the *Roswell Daily Record* read, “An examination by the army revealed last night that mysterious objects found on a lonely New Mexico ranch was a harmless high-altitude weather balloon – not a grounded flying disk.” (*Roswell Daily Record* – July 9, 1947) Thereafter, the incident was more or less forgotten for many years, until in 1980 the book *The Roswell Incident* by Charles Berlitz and William L. Moore was published, in which the authors claim that an extraterrestrial spacecraft crashed in Roswell in 1947 and that the U.S.

² Both articles can be viewed online at: <http://www.roswellfiles.com/Articles/PressReports.htm> (last access: 05/02/22).

government recovered both its debris and extraterrestrial corpses but hid this from the public (Berlitz & Moore, 1980). The fact that this conspiracy theory persists to this day is also related to a real UFO conspiracy. But before we turn to this, we must look at another event that plays an important role in the dealing with the UFO phenomenon in the USA: The UFO incident in Washington D.C. in 1952.

The Robertson Panel

In July 1952, UFOs were sighted over Washington, D.C. on several days and recorded by radar. Eyewitnesses reported flat, upward-curving flying objects that had lights on their outsides and were moving at high speeds. Andrews Air Force Base interceptors made multiple unsuccessful attempts to get close to the objects and establish visual contact. A wave of UFO sightings directly over the U.S. capital had a special dimension. The sightings made it to the front-page headlines across the country. The Air Force later explained that weather phenomena (temperature inversion) were responsible for the radar sightings and eyewitnesses were probably misinterpreting conventional astronomical phenomena such as stars and meteors. Nevertheless, the Truman administration and the CIA were concerned about the events and a special working group was formed within the *Office of Scientific Intelligence* (OSI) and the *Office of Current Intelligence* (OCI) to review the situation. The working group concluded that most UFO sightings could be easily explained, yet still recommended the CIA to continue to work on the issue (Dolan, 2002: 104–131).

In late 1953, the CIA formed a science panel that spent four days looking at the UFO issue. Physicist Howard P. Robertson was the group's chairman, which is why it is also known as the *Robertson Panel*. The panel's mission was to assess the threat to national security posed by UFO sightings and to develop procedural recommendations about how to proceed on the UFO issues. The panel concluded that there is no scientific evidence of the UFO phenomenon and that it does not pose an immediate threat to U.S. national security. Nevertheless, the UFO issue could pose an *indirect* threat resulting from several factors: "a. Misidentification of actual enemy artifacts by defense personnel. b. Overloading of emergency reporting channels with 'false' information ('noise to signal ratio' analogy—Berkner). c. Subjectivity of public to mass hysteria and greater vulnerability to possible enemy psychological warfare" (Duran Report, 1953: 15)

The panel recommended that air traffic control personnel should be specifically trained to recognize unusually illuminated objects (e.g., balloons, aircraft reflections) and natural phenomena (meteors, fireballs, mirages, noctilucent clouds), thereby reducing the number of alleged UFO reports. In addition, the UFO topic should be "debunked" and freed from its "aura of mystery" with the help of a kind of PR campaign:

The “debunking” aim would result in reduction in public interest in “flying saucers” which today evokes a strong psychological reaction. This education could be accomplished by mass media such as television, motion pictures, and popular articles. Basis of such education would be actual case histories which had been puzzling at first but later explained. As in the case of conjuring tricks, there is much less stimulation if the “secret” is known. Such a program should tend to reduce the current gullibility of the public and consequently their susceptibility to clever hostile propaganda.” (ibid.: 20)

As a further measure, the panel suggested monitoring civilian UFO research groups because they have a “potentially great influence on mass thinking” and could possibly be used for “subversive purposes” (ibid.: 23–24).

J. Allen Hynek, who later gained worldwide publicity as part of his work for *Project Blue Book*, was a scientific advisor to the Robertson Panel. Hynek famously evolved from a skeptic to a vehement proponent of scientific UFO research during his many years of involvement with the UFO subject. With regard to the impact of the Robertson Panel, he complained that it had brought scientific disrepute to the UFO subject, leading to the problem that it was not given the attention it needed to determine the nature of the UFO phenomenon. In the context of conspiracy theory interpretations, the Robertson Panel is repeatedly cited as evidence that the UFO subject has been systematically discredited and ridiculed in the United States. In any case, this episode proves that the subject was attributed relevance in the context of security policies. While UFOs were not directly classified as a threat, the potential *impact of the subject matter* was. Therefore, the goal was to gain control over this potential security risk. This was achieved at considerable expense in some cases, as, for example, the Bennewitz affair shows.

The Bennewitz Affair and the Majestic 12 Documents

Paul Bennewitz (1927–2003) was a physicist who operated a company called *Thunder Scientific* in Albuquerque, New Mexico, that manufactured high-sensitivity instruments for the U.S. Air Force and NASA, among others. The company still exists today and is carried on by his children. Bennewitz lived with his family in the late 1970s at *Four Hills Village*, in close proximity to the Kirtland Air Force Base, where not only were nuclear weapons stored, but all sorts of secret military research projects were conducted. In addition, Bennewitz was interested in the UFO phenomenon and was a member of a UFO amateur research group called the *Aerial Phenomena Research Organization*. In 1979, Bennewitz saw strange things over the Air Force base: multicolored, moving lights. He took photographs and filmed footage and received radio signals from the air base with antennas he built himself. Bennewitz believed all of this to be the activity of UFOs and contacted the base’s chief of security. Since Bennewitz had been a reliable supplier to the U.S. Army up to that point, they initially took him seriously and sent Richard Doty, an

Air Force intelligence officer, to see him. When the latter looked around Bennewitz's house, he could hardly believe his eyes. The technical equipment in Bennewitz's home was almost equivalent to a powerful listening device – and it was right next door to the Air Force base. This made him a critical factor in the secrecy of military research projects conducted at the air base. Bennewitz could have been told that the lights he was seeing and documenting were not UFOs but secret military projects and asked to keep quiet. But a different path was taken, which German sociologist Ingbert Jüdt, who has studied the events intensively, describes as follows:³ "The decision was made not to prohibit Paul Bennewitz from continuing to make his observations (which would have been possible without any problems due to the legal situation), but on the contrary to strengthen him in his belief in extraterrestrials – and to do so actively by feeding him with falsified signals and documents." (Jüdt, 2013: 214) In the following years, Bennewitz was systematically provided with information by the Air Force intelligence service, which convinced him more and more of the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrials. In the course of time, the whole thing developed into a kind of system: "double agents" obtained information from the UFO research scene and passed it on to the secret service. The latter converted this information into "official documents" and sent them back into the UFO scene. This procedure seems like a kind of overzealous implementation of the Robertson Panel's claims. In the case of Bennewitz and subsequent campaigns, the main goal was to discredit the UFO scene by feeding false information and thus protect military secrets. An enormous amount of effort was put into this. One of the informants who fed false information into the UFO scene was William Moore, one of the two authors of the 1980 book about the Roswell incident. For Paul Bennewitz, the affair ended with his mental breakdown (Bishop, 2005: 213–218). He was sent to a psychiatric hospital and was subsequently kept away from his former acquaintances and the UFO topic by his family (*ibid.*: 216–217). In 2013, a documentary about Richard Doty and the disinformation campaigns of the Air Force intelligence service on the UFO topic was released, entitled *Mirage Men*,⁴ based on the 2010 book of the same name by Mark Pilkington (Pilkington, 2010).

William Moore and Richard Doty also play an instrumental role in documents central to conspiracy theories about the Roswell incident: The *Majestic 12 documents*. Moore's collaboration with intelligence officer Doty was based on the fact that he was promised information about the government's "real" UFO knowledge in return for information from the UFO scene. Moore later explained his approach as follows:

I would play the disinformation game, get my hands dirty just often enough to lead those directing the process into believing that I was doing exactly what they wanted me to do, and all the while continue to burrow my way into the matrix so as to learn as much as

3 All translations from German by the authors.

4 See: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2254010/>

possible about who was directing it and why. It would be a classic case of turning the tables on the very ones who were most confident they had the situation well in hand. There was just one thing I needed to do this – Secrecy! I couldn't tell *anyone* about what I was doing; for if I did and word go back to those in control, I would be immediately cut off and cast adrift before I could learn anything. (Moore 1989: 16)

The reality, however, was different. Moore provided Doty with information about his research into the Roswell incident. Doty, in turn, ensured that this information was cast into “authentic” documents, which were then leaked anonymously to various UFO researchers and finally published in 1987 by UFO researcher Timothy Good in the book *Above Top Secret* (Good, 1987).

The content of the documents is that after the Roswell incident in 1947, where an extraterrestrial spacecraft crashed, a top-secret group of 12 members was formed on the instruction of U.S. President Harry Truman, with the aim of hiding knowledge of UFOs and extraterrestrials from the public. An excerpt reads:

On 07 July 1947, a secret operation was begun to assure recovery of wreckage of this object for scientific study. During the course of this operation, aerial reconnaissance discovered that four human-like beings had apparently ejected from the craft at some point before it exploded. These had fallen to earth about two miles east of the wreckage site. All four were dead and badly decomposed due to action by predators and exposure to the elements during the approximately one week time period which had elapsed before their discovery.⁵

“The sequel ‘Roswell’ started by UFO researchers,” Jüdt summarizes, “receives a follow-up volume whose authorship lies with an authority of the United States itself” (Jüdt, 2013: 219). The *Majestic 12 documents* play an important role in UFO conspiracy theories to this day and are still believed to be genuine by some adherents of corresponding interpretations. They are an impressive example of how close conspiracy theories and real conspiracies can occasionally be (Anton & Schink, 2021). The Bennewitz Affair and the events that led to the publication of the *Majestic 12 documents* demonstrate the effort that government institutions in the U.S. put into disinformation on the UFO subject in order to systematically promote belief in extraterrestrial visitors within the scene of UFO researchers. This approach only seemingly contradicts requirement of the Robertson Panel to debunk the UFO issue. The main target of the disinformation campaigns was not the general public, but UFO researchers, which were considered as a threat to the security of secret projects (Pilkington, 2010: 178–179). However, the effect of the disinformation campaigns was not limited to the UFO scene, but spread far and wide, contributing its part to the modern UFO myth.

⁵ The documents can be viewed online at: <https://vault.fbi.gov/Majestic%2012/Majestic%2012%20Part%201%20of%201/view> (last access: 05/04/22).

The Condon Report

Another important document for the perception of the UFO topic in the USA is the so-called Condon Report, which is a kind of final report of the *Project Blue Book*. It summarizes the results of a study conducted between 1966 and 1968 under the direction of the physicist Edward U. Condon, which was based on the data of *Project Blue Book* and its predecessor. In the nearly 1,500-page report, commissioned by the U.S. Air Force, 37 project collaborators examined various facets of the UFO phenomenon and relevant scientific principles. To this end, 59 UFO cases were studied more intensively. Although a conventional cause could not be found for all cases, the project director concluded in his summary that UFOs did not pose a threat to national security and that no scientific findings could be expected from the study of UFO cases. Literally, the report states:

The history of the past 21 years has repeatedly led Air Force officers to the conclusion that none of the things seen, or thought to have been seen, which pass by the name of UFO reports, constituted any hazard or threat to national security. [...] We know of no reason to question the finding of the Air Force that the whole class of UFO reports so far considered does not pose a defense problem. (Condon, 1968: 7)

At another point in the report it is written:

Our general conclusion is that nothing has come from the study of UFOs in the past 21 years that has added to scientific knowledge. Careful consideration of the record as it is available to us leads us to conclude that further extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby. (*ibid.*: 2)

These findings were more or less in line with the Robertson Panel's statements on the UFO subject. As a result, the U.S. Air Force discontinued *Project Blue Book*. Condon recommended that no further government program should be established to investigate UFOs. To this day the Colorado UFO Project remains one of the most extensive scientific investigations of the UFO phenomenon as part of a university research project, and it has been mostly positively received by the media, especially in the U.S. The Condon Report was considered a kind of 'scientific death blow' for the UFO subject, but it also received massive criticism. Of the many thousands of cases reported and investigated as part of *Project Blue Book*, most could be attributed to natural causes, but a small proportion (around 6 percent) remained unexplained until the end – including cases with bizarre occurrences (Anton, 2013: 54–55). The physicist Peter A. Sturrock, emeritus professor of the Center for Space Science and Astrophysics at Stanford, writes with respect to the Condon report: "The analysis of evidence by categories shows that there are substantial and significant differences between the findings of the project staff and those that the director attributes to the project." (Sturrock, 1987: 75) Allen Hynek also harshly

criticized the summary of the Condon report. He wrote: “The Condon Report settled nothing. However, carefully read, the report constitutes about as good an argument for the study of the UFO phenomenon as could have been made in a short time, and by a group of specialists in their individual disciplines having no prior knowledge of the subject.” (Hynek, 1972: 243)

The Condon Report recognizably followed a *military logic* in its assessment of the UFO phenomenon. Since UFOs do not represent a threat to the national security of the USA, further *scientific* investigation of the phenomenon is also unnecessary. With reference to the Condon report it was, for decades, a kind of party line of the authorities in the USA that after *Project Blue Book* there would be no more national interest in the UFO topic in the USA. But from 2007 at the latest this was no longer true, as publications from 2017 show.

A New Chapter

In 2017, a new chapter in the UFO story began in the USA. Contrary to the U.S. government’s assertions that they were no longer interested in the UFO phenomenon, in December 2017 it became known through media reports that the *Defense Intelligence Agency* (DIA), a military intelligence agency, maintained a secret UFO research program called the *Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program* (AATIP) from 2007 to 2012 (perhaps longer) (see, for example, Cooper et al., 2017). The program’s mission was to collect and evaluate information on UFO sightings in both military and civilian contexts. Its creation was due to Senator Harry Reid (1939–2021), then the Democratic majority leader in the U.S. Senate. But the real instigator of the program was billionaire Robert Bigelow, who was a friend of Reid’s and encouraged him to create it. Bigelow has been known for many years to have a strong interest in frontier sciences. In 1995, he founded the private research organization *National Institute for Discovery Science* (NIDS), which investigated, among other things, alleged mysterious incidents at the so-called Skinwalker Ranch, a storied farm in Utah (Kelleher & Knapp, 2005; Lacatski et al., 2021). AATIP received a total of 22 million dollar in state funding and collaborated with Bigelow’s company, *Bigelow Aerospace*, in evaluating information about UFO sightings. The head of AATIP was Luis Elizondo, a former U.S. Army Special Agent.

The publication of information about AATIP was made via the organization *To The Stars Academy* (TTSA), co-founded in 2017 by the well-known rock musician Tom DeLonge. The composition of TTSA raised eyebrows from the beginning, as among its members were, for example, the former senior CIA employee Jim Semivan or the former Deputy Secretary of Defense, Christopher Mellon. Another member is the scientist Harold Puthoff, who had formerly worked for NIDS, which is funded by Robert Bigelow, and who investigated paranormal abilities on behalf of the U.S. Army, the DIA and the CIA in the 1970s as part of the legendary *Stargate Project* (Smith, 2004). According to its own website, the *To The Stars Academy*’s goals

were as follows: “TTSA collects documents and physical materials from public and private sources related to the UAP phenomena to study it and then transitions the transformative technologies behind it to broader applications of public benefit.”⁶ When Tom DeLonge introduced the *To The Stars Academy* in a press conference in October 2017, mainstream media took little notice. The event only generated some attention among UFO enthusiasts and in music magazines. This was to change abruptly in December 2017.

Beginning in mid-December 2017, the *To The Stars Academy* published three U.S. military videos allegedly showing unidentified flying objects. As a result, a whole series of public statements were made by military personnel involved in the alleged UFO incidents. The U.S. military eventually confirmed the authenticity of the videos.⁷ One of the recordings comes from a 2004 UFO incident. On November 14, a radar-visual detection of an unidentified flying object by the *Nimitz Carrier Strike Group* warship fleet occurred off the coast of southern California. Fighter jet pilots approaching the object from the aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz* described it as a type of large “Tic Tac” about 15 m long, with no windows, wings or tail, no visible engine and no exhaust plume. The object reportedly performed flight maneuvers that would not be possible for any known human aircraft (Knuth et al., 2019).

On May 28, 2019, the *Washington Post* headlined, “UFOs exist and everyone needs to adjust to this fact.”⁸ The basic message of the article is that in view of the publication of various U.S. military information on the UFO issue, there could no longer be any doubt about the reality of the UFO phenomenon (in the sense of flying objects with anomalous characteristics). This positioning differs in a significant way from the usual coverage by important leading media outlets in the USA on the UFO topic. However, the *Washington Post* article does not stand alone, but is part of a whole wave of media events related to the UFO phenomenon that have attracted much attention in the U.S. and worldwide since late 2017. The basic tenor is: the UFO phenomenon should be taken seriously.

This 180-degree turnaround in reporting on the UFO phenomenon finally arrived, with some delay, in Germany in 2021. While for decades the topic was again and again considered to be irrational, pseudoscientific or ridiculous in the German mainstream media discourse, suddenly very factual and thoughtful articles started to be found. For example, in May 2021 one reads in an article in *DER SPIEGEL* magazine:

6 See: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210609011517/https://home.tothestarsacademy.com/> (last access: 05/02/22).

7 See for example: <https://www.stern.de/panorama/weltgeschehen/ufo-videos-aus-kampfjets--us-marine-bestaeigt-echtheit-der-aufnahmen-8913386.html> (last access: 05/02/22).

8 See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/05/28/ufos-exist-everyone-needs-adjust-that-fact/> (last access: 05/02/22).

Apparently, the airmen did not always remain alone during training missions in US military airspace. Some reported bizarre encounters above and below the clouds – with flying objects. Sometimes as large as a bus, sometimes as small as a suitcase. The flying objects moved with astonishing speed and performed maneuvers as if a different physics applied to them. (Evers 2021a)

In June 2021, the topic even made it onto the cover of *DER SPIEGEL*. Under an image from one of the videos published by TTSA, it reads, “Are we still alone? The Pentagon’s UFO files and the search for life in space.” With regards to the three published videos, *DER SPIEGEL* states:

The recordings were clicked on millions of times on the Internet. The Ministry of Defense has now admitted that they are authentic. But what exactly the films show is not clear to the viewer. It could be many things – spots of flies on the lens, an artifact of an electronic system. And yes, also something completely different, something supernatural that could shake our worldview. (Evers 2021b: 86)

Elsewhere, the author of the article asks:

Is the Western superpower, which spends many times more on its military than any other country on earth, no longer master of its own airspace? If so, the national security of the U.S. and the rest of the world could be massively threatened. But from whom? Has an opposing power, China or Russia, developed a new type of drone technology, unnoticed by intelligence agencies, that it is now using to trick U.S. fighter pilots at will? Or are the inexplicable flying objects – this question is no longer taboo in the U.S. – actually something entirely different, namely companions of extraterrestrial origin? Are they scouts of a highly technological super civilization that comes from unimaginable distances, from outside the solar system, many light years from Earth?” (Ibid.)

These questions are in no way meant to be ironic, as the article ends with: “Sure, all this sounds far-fetched, like science fiction – but the question of extraterrestrial life is actually a mega-topic in current space exploration.” (Ibid.)

The fact that ex-U.S. president Barack Obama spoke out publicly about the UFO topic in May 2021 could probably be of significance for this new tone in the German-language leading media. When he was asked on a talk show what it was about these “damn aliens” that everyone is currently talking about, Obama replied after a joke that he was not allowed to speak publicly about these things, verbatim: “But what is true and I’m actually being serious here, is that there is footage and records of objects in the skies that we don’t know exactly what they are. We can’t explain how they move their trajectory. They did not have an easily explainable pattern. And so you know, I think that people still take seriously trying to investigate and figure out what that is. [...]”⁹

⁹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xp6Ph5iTlgc> (last access: 05/02/22).



Figure 1. Cover of *DER SPIEGEL* of June 26, 2021: „Are we still alone? The Pentagon's UFO files and the search for life in space.“

At the end of June 2021, the report of the so-called *UAP-Task Force* was published. The acronym UAP stands for *Unidentified Aerial Phenomena* and is ultimately simply another name for “UFO.” The task force was established while the Trump administration was still in power, with the goal of systematically collecting and evaluating information that the military and the

Department of Defense have in relation to the UFO phenomenon and making the corresponding analyses public. It is thereby the direct successor organization to AATIP. For the report, 144 military reports of sightings of unidentified celestial phenomena between 2004 and 2021 were analyzed. In 80 cases, flying objects were detected by multiple sensors simultaneously (e.g., via radar, infrared, electro-optical sensing, weapon seeking devices, etc.); in 18 cases, unusual movement patterns or flight characteristics were reported; and in 11 cases, pilots even reported near-collisions with UFOs. Except for one case, the report states that the sightings could not be attributed to a specific explanation based on the available information. The report also clarifies that the objects sighted are not military aircraft from the official or classified U.S. inventory, nor are they likely to be advanced developments from China or Russia.¹⁰

In late 2021, President Biden signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which is the legislative basis for the U.S. defense budget in 2022.¹¹ The act also includes the establishment of a UFO Investigative Agency (*Airborne Object Identification and Management Synchronization Group* – AOIMSG) to succeed the *UAP Task Force*. The agency is set to collect reports of UFO or UAP sightings, evaluate them scientifically, and brief policymakers and the public at regular intervals on the results of the investigations.

On May 17, 2022, a hearing was held at the U.S. Congress that can rightly be described as historic. The topic of the hearing was UAPs and their potential threat to U.S. national security. At the very beginning of the session, André Carson, Democratic Party politician and head of the hearing, emphasized: “This hearing and oversight work has a simple idea at its core. Unidentified aerial phenomena are a potential national security threat, and they need to be treated that way. For too long the stigma associated with UAPs has gotten in the way of good intelligence analysis. Pilots avoided reporting or laughed at when they did. DOD officials relegated the issue to the back room or swept it under the rug entirely fearful of a skeptical national security community. Today, we know better UAPs are unexplained. It’s true, but they are real. They need to be investigated and many threats they pose need to be mitigated.”¹²

Fielding questions from the deputies were Ronald S. Moultrie, U.S. undersecretary of defense, intelligence and security, and Scott W. Bray, deputy director of U.S. Naval Intelligence. Moultrie and Bray reported that since the release of the UAP task force’s report in the summer

¹⁰ The report can be viewed via the following link: <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/Preliminary-Assessment-UAP-20210625.pdf> (last access: 05/02/22).

¹¹ The legal text can be viewed online: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4350/text> (last access: 05/02/22).

¹² A full manuscript of the hearing can be found here: <https://thedebrief.org/complete-transcript-of-congresss-historic-hearing-on-unidentified-aerial-phenomena/> (last access: 25/02/22).

of 2021, additional cases have been added, bringing the total to about 400 UAP cases. The majority of the observed phenomena would have involved “physical objects.” In some cases, the flying objects would have exhibited unexplained flight behavior. Bray explained: “I would simply say that there are a number of other events in which we do not have an explanation in which there are a small handful in which there are flight characteristics or signature management that we can’t explain with the data that we have. We’ll continue, those are obviously the ones that are of most interest to us.” So far, there is no evidence for an extraterrestrial origin of the objects, but one is “open to all hypotheses.” Bray emphasized: “But we’ll go wherever the data takes us. Again, we’ve made no assumptions about what this is or isn’t. We’re committed to understanding these. And so we’ll go wherever that data takes us.” Following the public hearing, another secret session was held. The reason for this was that the UFO topic repeatedly touches on areas that are subject to secrecy, such as military methods for airspace surveillance. Needless to say, this fueled speculation about what was discussed in this secret session.

With the public hearing at the latest, one can speak of a paradigm shift in the USA. The conclusions of the Robertson Panel and the Condon Report, which shaped the political handling of the UFO issue in the USA for decades, have been practically turned on their heads: UFOs are considered a potential threat to U.S. national security, and the issue is to be destigmatized and thoroughly investigated. In summary, the 2017 TTSA publications set in motion a process that has ultimately led to the re-emergence of official government UFO research in the U.S., half a century after *Project Blue Book* was discontinued.

Conclusion: What’s Going on Here? A New Disinformation Campaign?

In view of the fact that the UFO topic in the USA has been linked to security and intelligence interests from the very beginning and has been the subject of disinformation campaigns and diversionary tactics on several occasions, this possibility should also be considered in relation to current events. The goal could be, as in previous disinformation campaigns on the UFO topic, the protection of military secrets or national security in general. According to current information, however, there are not many indications to suggest this. Moreover, this explanation would be almost ‘unspectacular’ compared to the one that at least some UFO sightings are actually due to technically advanced flying objects, possibly even controlled by an alien intelligence. The report of the UAP task force does not contain any hints for an extraterrestrial background of the phenomena. However, this possibility is not explicitly excluded.

The American UFO researcher Richard Dolan comes to the following conclusion after analyzing the developments since 2017:

All I can say, it's my own opinion, that TTSA is not a government op[eration]. I don't see this. I don't see it as a CIA op[eration]. [...] I argue that they look to me like private faction with some decent connections and some high-level connections for sure and I think that's the correct position here so far. I wasn't sure about this early on. This is my position now. I think what's been coming out these past two years is beyond anything that any organisation connecting to UFOs has ever been able to accomplish. [...] What they've done is far beyond anything that any researcher, and I include myself here, could have imagined would be possible.¹³

We would like to explicitly agree with this assessment. At the moment, it does not look like the publications on the UFO topic since 2017 are due to a targeted intelligence campaign or even a disinformation campaign. Of course, one cannot rule out this possibility. However, from our point of view, it is much more likely that the U.S. military has repeatedly made and continues to make observations in the sky that it cannot explain. The difference is that it is now – at least in part – talking about it publicly. This, in turn, is due to the fact that the TTSA has succeeded in combining a number of personalities into a group which not only has a great interest in the UFO subject, but also has access to information from the U.S. security apparatus and excellent contacts with the media. According to our thesis, the activities of the TTSA have led to an *opening of the discourse* in the USA, in Germany and also in other countries, which makes a different communication about the topic possible. However, so far this does not change the *scientific* evaluation of the UFO topic. The fact that again and again anomalies of various kinds are observed in the sky and also recorded by various measuring instruments cannot be seriously denied. So far, however, there is no clear evidence that at least some UFO sightings are extraterrestrial spaceships, probes or the like (Ballester Olmos & Bullard, 2017). However, this does not mean that we deny the purpose and significance of investigating the UFO phenomenon. Quite the contrary: UFOs should become an established academic subject of research that investigates the topic in an open, unbiased manner (Anton, Hövelmann & Schetsche, 2013). At least, the changed discursive framework regarding the topic makes it no longer entirely inconceivable that UFO research will establish itself academically. The first signs are already discernible.

Addendum

Shortly after we finished this text, news came that NASA will officially launch a project to study UAPs. A NASA announcement on 09 June states: "NASA is commissioning a study team to start early in the fall to examine unidentified aerial phenomena (UAPs) – that is, observations of events in the sky that cannot be identified as aircraft or known natural phenomena – from a scientific perspective. The study will focus on identifying available data, how best to collect

13 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooaU3DEhmqQ&t=509s> (last access: 05.02.2022).

future data, and how NASA can use that data to move the scientific understanding of UAPs forward." It is probably no exaggeration to call this an important milestone in establishing the UFO subject as a legitimate area of academic research. The opening of academic science to the UFO subject brings with it the chance of a real gain in knowledge regarding this phenomenon, which has been a mystery for decades. According to Allen Hynek, the scientific research of the UFO phenomenon could even mean a scientific quantum jump: "When the long awaited solution to the UFO problem comes, I believe that it will prove to be not merely the next small step in the march of science but a mighty and totally unexpected quantum jump" (Hynek, 1972: 288). At present, the general conditions appear to be quite favorable for finding out whether Hynek was right.

References

- Anton A. (2013). Zur (Un-)Möglichkeit wissenschaftlicher UFO-Forschung. In M. Schetsche & A. Anton (Eds.), *Diesseits der Denkverbote: Bausteine für eine wissenschaftliche UFO-Forschung* (pp. 49–77). LIT.
- Anton, A., Hövelmann, G., & Schetsche, M. (2013). Manifest für eine reflexive UFO-Forschung. In M. Schetsche & A. Anton (Eds.), *Diesseits der Denkverbote: Bausteine für eine wissenschaftliche UFO-Forschung* (pp. 261–264). LIT.
- Anton, A. (2019). UFO research. In G. Mayer (Ed.), *N equals 1: Single case studies in anomalistics* (pp. 133–150). LIT.
- Anton, A., & Danny, A. (2015). UFO-Sichtungen. In G. Mayer, M. Schetsche, I. Schmied-Knittel, & D. Vaitl (Eds.), *An den Grenzen der Erkenntnis: Handbuch der wissenschaftlichen Anomalistik* (pp. 332–345). Schattauer.
- Anton, A., & Schink, A. (2021). *Der Kampf um die Wahrheit: Verschwörungstheorien zwischen Fake, Fiktion und Fakten*. Komplett-Media.
- Ballester Olmos, V., & Bullard, T.E. (2017). The nature of UFO evidence: Two views. Available online: https://www.academia.edu/33352049/THE_NATURE_OF_UFO_EVIDENCE_TWO_VIEWS
- Berlitz, C., & Moore, W. (1980). *The Roswell incident*. Grosset & Dunlap.
- Bishop, G. (2005). *Project beta: The story of Paul Bennewitz, national security, and the creation of a modern UFO myth*. Paraview.
- Bullard, T.E. (2010). *The myth and mystery of UFOs*. University Press of Kansas.
- Carey, T.J., & Schmitt, D.R. (2019). *UFO secrets inside Wright-Patterson: Eyewitness accounts from the real Area 51*. New Page Books.
- Condon, E.U. (1968). *Scientific study of unidentified flying objects*. University of Colorado. [Available through <https://documents.theblackvault.com/documents/ufos/CondonReport-Full.pdf>]

- Cooper, H., Blumenthal R., & Kean, L. (2017, December 16). Glowing auras and ‘Black Money’: The Pentagon’s mysterious U.F.O. program. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/us/politics/pentagon-program-ufo-harry-reid.html>
- Dolan, R. (2002). *UFOs and the national security state: Chronology of a cover-up 1941–1973*. Hampton Roads.
- Durant, F.C. (1953). Memorandum for the assistant director for scientific intelligence from F C Durant: Report of meetings of the Office of Scientific Intelligence, Scientific Advisory Panel on unidentified flying objects, January 14–18, 1953, 16th February 1953.
- Evers, M, (2021a). „Es gibt viel mehr Sichtungen als bisher öffentlich bekannt“. *SPIEGEL Online*. <https://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/weltall/ufos-ueber-den-usa-es-gibt-viel-mehr-sichtungen-als-bisher-offentlich-bekannt-a-d8082b4c-21d2-4772-91bf-1e925d8e7082>
- Evers, M. (2021b, June 26): Unheimliche Begegnung der dritten Art. *DER SPIEGEL*, 26, 84–92.
- Gerritzen, D. (2016). *Erstkontakt: Warum wir uns auf Außerirdische vorbereiten müssen*. Kosmos.
- Good, T. (1987). *Above top secret: The worldwide U.F.O. cover-up*. Sidgwick & Jackson.
- Hynek, J. A. (1972). *The UFO experience. A scientific inquiry*. Henry Regnery.
- Jüdt, I. (2013). Manipulation und Misstrauen in der UFO-Politik: Von der Bennewitz-Affäre zur Exopolitik-Bewegung. In M. Schetsche & A. Anton (Eds.), *Diesseits der Denkverbote: Bausteine für eine wissenschaftliche UFO-Forschung* (pp. 201–231). LIT.
- Kelleher, C., & Knapp, G. (2005). *Hunt for the skinwalker: Science confronts the unexplained at a remote ranch in Utah*. Paraview Pocket Books.
- Knuth, K. H., Powell, R. M., & Reali, P. A. (2019). Estimating flight characteristics of anomalous unidentified aerial vehicles. *Entropy*, 21(10), 1–19.
- Lacatski, J. T., Kelleher, C. A., & Knapp, G. (2021). *Skinwalkers at the Pentagon: An insider’s account of the secret government UFO program*. RTMA, LLC.
- Moore, W. (1989). UFOs and the U.S. government: Part I. *MUFON UFO Journal*, 259, 9–18.
- Pilkington, M. (2010). *Mirage men: An adventure into paranoia, espionage, psychological warfare, and UFOs*. Skyhorse.
- Smith, P. (2004): *Reading the enemy’s mind: Inside Star Gate: America’s psychic espionage program*. Forge Books.
- Sturrock, P. A. (2007). The role of anomalies in scientific research. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 21(2), 241–260.