DO UFOS EXIST

On December 16, 2017 the *New York Times* published two stories that read almost like science fiction. For at least five years, the Defense Department housed a $22-million, clandestine program to investigate UFOs. Military pilots had sent in reports of objects they observed that moved in unfamiliar ways; the mission of the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, as it was called, was to investigate those claims to see if there was truly something otherworldly behind those sightings.

It’s unclear just how many reports pilots had filed to the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, but people who have come forward about the program have made it clear that there would have been a lot more reports filed if it hadn’t been for one thing: stigma. “The sightings were not often reported up the military’s chain of command, [former senator Harry Reid] said, because service members were afraid they would be laughed at or stigmatized.”

American culture is steeped in depictions of what would happen if sophisticated aliens visited Earth, from *E.T.* to *Arrival* to *Independence Day*. Some are more hackneyed than others; some are downright terrifying. But outside the clear genres of fiction, most conversations about UFOs happen online, and with varying degrees of vehemence.

Let’s face it — believing in the paranormal has become shorthand for crazy.

“60 years of folklorization and Hollywood production have, in the minds of the general public, definitely trivialized the subject. It has become a ‘standard’ consumer product,” Jean-Christophe Doré, the technical manager for UFO-SCIENCE, the French association that aims to scientifically evaluate aspects of UFO phenomena, tells Futurism.

But to some, that association might be changing. Luis Elizondo, the military official formerly in charge of the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, told *The New York Times’*Daily podcast:

*I think we’re entering an era of actual evidence. We’ve reached a moment of critical mass of credible witnesses, and these are witnesses that are in charge of multi-million-dollar weapon platforms with, in some cases, the highest level of security clearances and in some cases they’re trained observers. When these individuals are trying to report something, ‘Hey I saw this when I was flying,’ that can be turned around and people say ‘hey look if you’re crazy, there goes your flight status.’ Or all of a sudden commander so-and-so in charge of this very elite fighter wing will no longer be taken seriously. In fact, people are going to start to judge whether or not maybe our friend here might not be a little crazy, or maybe some loose screws. That’s always a threat to these people’s career. And let’s face it, these people have to pay their taxes, they have to pay their mortgages, they have families, they’re putting their kids through school. And frankly, they’re just really good patriots and they want to do the right thing. And that stigma is pretty powerful. It stops a lot of people from reporting something maybe they would normally report.*

Government officials are no longer hiding their belief that extraterrestrials might be out there. Could this be a turning point for once-fringe communities and open doors for those looking to bring scientific rigor to the quest to understand UFOs?

**Logical Fallacy**

Most phenomena thought to be the doings of extraterrestrials are eventually explained. Take Project Blue Book, for example, the U.S. government’s program to investigate unidentified flying objects that ran from 1947 until 1969. Of the more than 12,000 reported sightings, investigators found out the real (not paranormal) story for all but 700 or so. That’s a pretty good percentage, says Joe Nickell, senior research fellow at the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and paranormal investigator — about as much as you’d expect from any other scientific discipline. “A lot of these cases are never going to be solved because I don’t know what you think you saw 10 years ago. They’re not investigatable,” Nickell tells Futurism.

In other disciplines, a certain amount of uncertainty will mean that more studies are needed to definitely prove a link. But that’s not what happens with UFOs. “We spend all these years, virtually our entire lives (it’s what I’m doing with mine), and we’re solving most cases. We’re down to, say, 5 percent [that we can’t explain], and we’re arguing over the 5 percent,” Nickell says. You give someone a level-headed, thorough, earthly explanation for a particular report, and they’ll just respond, “But what about *this other* one?” This is, as Nickell points out, an argument from ignorance — in essence, X must be true because you can’t prove that X is false. “Why don’t we assume that, if we can explain 95 percent, that if we knew the answer, it would fall into the same category as the others?” Nickell says.

Belief in extraterrestrials is fueled by a *lack* of evidence, not its presence. For some people, that’s enough.

**The Psychology Of Believers**

More than half of Americans believe that aliens exist, according to a 2015 poll. Scientists have evaluated what distinguishes believers and non-believers and didn’t find much, *the Conversation* notes. But people that believe they had an abduction experience, perhaps a more extreme form of belief, are more likely to have fantasy-prone personalities, have experienced childhood trauma, or be prone to hypnosis that can make them suggestible to false memories, studies have shown. That doesn’t mean they’re lying about their experiences — they often genuinely believe they happened — but those experiences were often not quite what the individuals thought they were.

What distinguishes people who believe in Big Foot, for example, from those who believe in UFOs? It’s the suspicion of government involvement, Nickell says. More people believe in conspiracies than ever; if someone were looking to find a black-ops government program and a conspiracy to keep it secret, they’d find the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program.

“I think, for most people who believe in these UFO claims, it’s tied up with conspiracy. If you want to believe that UFOs are visiting the planet, there kind of has to be a cover up,” Rob Brotherton, a psychology professor at Barnard College and the author of *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*, tells Futurism. And because they’re built on secrecy, it’s really hard to disprove a conspiracy theory, Brotherton points out.

Conspiracy theories about UFOs, in particular, are pretty widespread, and they have a psychological appeal that goes against the stereotype of weirdos wearing tinfoil hats. Conspiracy theories rely on the same pattern-recognition techniques we use in our daily lives, and in science as well. “Conspiracy theories make for great stories, they’re tantalizing, mysteries not yet fully solved. Your brain is like, ‘What’s up with that?’ it’s not satisfied until it knows if these things are related.”

Most of the time, people who believe in them are psychologically normal. But the belief that the government or aliens are specifically pursuing you as an individual — a *me*and not an *us*focus —might indicate a psychiatric disorder like schizophrenia, though that would be one of a number of symptoms.

“It’s not impossible [that extraterrestrials are visiting Earth],” Brotherton says. “Maybe they’re technologically advanced, maybe they are able to make it here. That’s not beyond the realms of possibility; it doesn’t defy the laws of physics necessarily. It’s worth keeping an eye out for this stuff.”

**Worthy of Pursuit**

Science hinges on discovery and the pursuit to understand the unknown. It’s not out of the realm of possibility, then, that some of these UFO reports are worthy of rigorous investigation. They could reveal something new about atmospheric phenomena, or physics, or, yes, possibly even extraterrestrials.

It’s not easy to separate the mysterious sightings, the ones that could yield something scientifically interesting, from the sightings that can quickly be resolved. “These are, almost by definition, unusual things to start with, something in the sky that we don’t know what it is. We don’t see them every night. So we have no idea [at the beginning of an investigation] if they’re going to be productive or not,” Nickell says.

Despite these difficulties, some investigators are already bringing the rigor of science to examine UFO reports. Some, like Nickell, are hunting down witnesses and testing theories; others, like Chase Kloetzke, the deputy director of investigations at MUFON, the world’s oldest and largest UFO investigation group, are retrieving physical evidence and testing alloys of unknown metals with cutting-edge microscopes and trained metallurgists. A number of organizations receive private funding, which sometimes means they have fewer resources than they would if they received governments grants. And the work is often thankless. “I’m trying, in the name of science, to do what most scientists don’t have time to do, what they consider frivolous nonsense,” Nickell says. “UFOs have been looked into now by the tens of thousands, even by official government studies. And what do we have to show? Not a lot. How many more will we have to look into? I would say we will never be done. I’m in it for the long haul.”

To do these sorts of investigations, it’s irrelevant whether or not they believe that extraterrestrials have really visited Earth. All people need is a rigorous scientific mind, perseverance to investigate doggedly, and a sensitive nose for falsehoods.

Now that information about the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program has spilled out, it buoys those who hope that the government might have evidence that could more clearly indicate the presence of extraterrestrials, something that stands up to the rigor of scientific evaluation. “Do we have a smoking gun? We do, it’s just locked up,” Kloetzke, of MUFON, says referring to the “physical material [the government] has been holding and analyzing.” “We’re pushing down the doors. We’re trying to breach this information,” she says.

Still, opinions vary on how much evidence is enough to prove the existence of extraterrestrials. “I think most people are going to need a craft to land in Central Park [to believe UFOs are real],” Kloetzke says.

“There is absolutely no solid evidence that meets any standards of scientific ‘proof’ that UFOs exist. That’s why people can’t take it seriously,” Sara Seager, an astrophysicist at MIT who studies exoplanets and was quoted in the *New York Times* article, tells Futurism. To some, in the end, evidence doesn’t matter. “I am not a UFO supporter in any way. It’s just like why do people believe in God? There’s no way to scientifically prove the existence of any God or gods. People just want to believe.”