



UFOs are an intriguing sci-fi problem; Congress must act accordingly

BY MARIK VON RENNENKAMPFF, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 07/08/21 05:30 PM EDT

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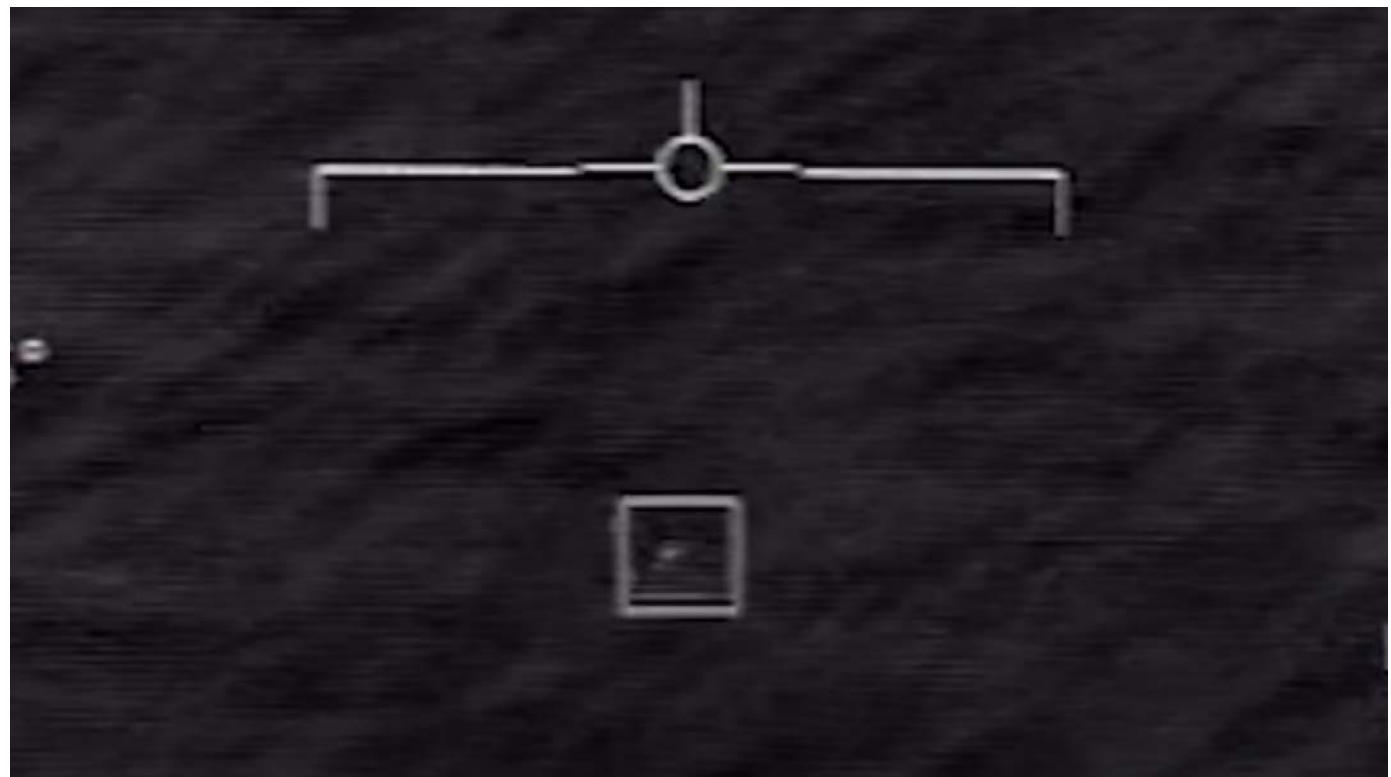
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"Lack of wings and lack of evident means of propulsion clearly rule out conventional aircraft and helicopters. Many are soundless, many move at such speeds and with such accelerations that they defy understanding in terms of present technology."

This description – which outlines an intriguing science problem – could easily apply to mysterious flying objects encountered by military aviators in recent years. In 2014 and 2015, for example, Navy pilots tracked unidentified craft seemingly able to turn, stop in midair and rapidly accelerate “with no jet engine, no exhaust plume” and no wings.

A few years earlier, at least five naval aviators witnessed an object that, as a squadron commander later recounted, had no “wings or rotors and

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outran our F-18s,” accelerating to extreme speeds in the blink of an eye.

According to former director of national intelligence John Ratcliffe, unidentified objects are engaging “in actions that are difficult to explain. Movements that are hard to replicate, that we don’t have the technology for, or are traveling at speeds that exceed the sound barrier without a sonic boom.” Asked about these encounters, Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah) referred to “technology which is in a whole different sphere than anything we understand.”

Similarly, former President Obama stated that “there’s footage and records of objects in the skies, that we don’t know exactly what they are. We can’t explain how they moved.” Obama’s CIA director, John Brennan, went a step further, speculating that these mysterious craft might constitute “a different form of life.”

But the description at the top of this column is not from a high-level government official or a pilot. Nor, despite similarities, does it describe any recent UFO encounters.

Instead, it is an excerpt from 1968 congressional testimony by the late James McDonald, a leading atmospheric physicist and professor of meteorology at the University of Arizona.

Initially a skeptic with only a tangential interest in UFOs, McDonald found his scientific curiosity aroused after discovering that official explanations for several noteworthy UFO sightings were absurdly unscientific.

After spending years combing through declassified documents and scrupulously tracking down more than 500 witnesses, McDonald became



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the world's premier scientific authority on UFOs. Perhaps most intriguingly, his [archive](#) of extraordinary, [physics-defying](#) UFO reports spanning the mid-1940s to the late 1960s has remarkable parallels to [more recent incidents](#).

Unsurprisingly, McDonald's painstaking research turned him from skeptic to outspoken advocate of serious academic study of UFOs. But as an exasperated McDonald [told](#) Congress, the scientific community "has been casually ignoring as nonsense a matter of extraordinary scientific importance."

Testifying alongside McDonald at that 1968 hearing on UFOs was J. Allen Hynek, chair of the astronomy department at Northwestern University. Hynek, like McDonald, began his academic career a fierce UFO skeptic. But after two decades as a consultant to a U.S. Air Force project cataloguing UFO sightings, Hynek had seen enough compelling data to [implore Congress and the scientific community](#) to initiate a robust, fiercely independent academic inquiry into such encounters.

Today, scientists are generally dismissive of UFO reports. While most contemporary academics are unfamiliar with Hynek and McDonald's meticulous research, any scientist or skeptic would do themselves a service by [reading Hynek's concise reflections on a 20-year career investigating the UFO phenomenon](#).

Hynek and McDonald were particularly struck by the sincerity, good judgment and professional caliber of hundreds of often-reluctant witnesses who had nothing to gain – and much to lose – by reporting UFO sightings. Moreover, McDonald and Hynek found that radar and other technical data corroborated credible eyewitness accounts in [many](#) of the

most remarkable incidents. As Hynek observed, skepticism of the UFO topic is largely due to scientists' lack of exposure to such "really challenging UFO data."

Moreover, much of the aversion to serious investigation of these phenomena is rooted in the conclusions of a massive 1969 report funded by the U.S. Air Force. Billed as the final say on UFOs, the 1,000-page report's summary claimed that "extensive study of UFOs probably cannot be justified in the expectation that science will be advanced thereby."

But this conclusion, written by physicist Edward Condon and reported by major media outlets at the time, did not reflect important scientific analysis in the report. In stark contrast to Condon's recommendation against academic study of UFOs, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics' scientific consensus held that "a phenomenon with such a high ratio of unexplained cases (about 30% in the Report itself) should arouse sufficient curiosity to continue its study."

McDonald, Hynek and several other experts also made abundantly clear that much of the so-called Condon Report was unforgivably flawed. It was biased from the outset, omitted important cases and critical context, relied on shoddy or nonexistent witness interviews and frequently ascribed absurd, unscientific explanations to extraordinary events.

As Stanford physicist Peter Sturrock noted, "critical reviews [of the report] came from those scientists who had actually carried out research in the UFO area, whereas the laudatory reviews came from scientists who had not carried out such research."

But for an academic community already wary of involvement in a topic associated with kooky UFO fanatics and bizarre works of science fiction, the report's overarching recommendation against rigorous academic study of UFOs was – as Hynek accurately noted – “the kiss of death to any further investigation.” A half century later, little has changed. With few exceptions, the stigma largely remains.

Following the report's release, an exasperated McDonald spoke at a symposium organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, telling his colleagues that “science is in default for having failed to mount any truly adequate studies of [the UFO] problem.” The audio recording of McDonald's AAAS presentation is a must-listen for any skeptical scientist.

A few years before writing the book that inspired the film “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” Hynek drilled down to the root of the problem: “So powerful and all-encompassing have the misconceptions among scientists been about the nature of UFO information that an amazing lethargy and apathy to investigation has prevailed. This apathy is unbecoming to the ideals of science and undermines public confidence.”

Make no mistake: These are remarkable statements from two academics who began their careers deeply skeptical of the UFO phenomenon.



With recent UFO encounters mirroring the incidents that stirred Hynek and McDonald's academic curiosity, Congress must continue to assert itself on an issue that begs for scientific investigation.

It can begin by following Hynek's recommendation to establish an independent "UFO Scientific Board of Inquiry, properly funded" and staffed by academic experts with access to relevant data. To alleviate national security concerns, sensitive information can be analyzed by Department of Energy and NASA scientists with security clearances.

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As the proliferation of nuclear weapons barrels on unchecked and a drought of "biblical proportions" grips the United States, Hynek's

rhetorical question to Congress whether we can “afford to overlook a potential breakthrough of great significance” is more relevant than ever.

Perhaps more importantly, as Hynek eloquently stated in his congressional testimony, “even if the sole purpose of such a study is to satisfy human curiosity, to probe the unknown and to provide intellectual adventure, then it is in line with what science has always stood for.”

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