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SCIENCE & SOCIETY

UFO theorists gain support abroad, but repression at home

Study by French officials, routine unexplained sightings, US military safety aspects combine to boost believers

By Leslie Kean, 5/21/2000

Last month's release of the first detailed satellite images of Area 51, the top-secret US Air Force test site in Nevada, prompted a Web site meltdown as people from across the nation logged on in search of clues about unidentified flying objects.

"The interest has been really phenomenal," said David Mountain, marketing director for Aerial Images Inc., which posted the high-resolution photographs of Area 51 on the Internet.

But those hoping to see signs that captured UFOs are stored at the site (as some aficionados have suggested) were destined to be disappointed. Most of Area 51's operations occur underground, making photos meaningless.

Anyone looking for fresh information on UFOs would have better luck trying a new, but less publicized, source: a study by the French military, just translated into an approved English edition.

High-level officials - including retired generals from the French Institute of Higher Studies for National Defense, a government-financed strategic planning agency - recently took a giant step in openly challenging skepticism about UFOs.

In a report based on a three-year study, they concluded that "numerous manifestations observed by reliable witnesses could be the work of craft of extraterrestrial origin" and that, in fact, the best explanation is "the extraterrestrial hypothesis." Although not categorically proven, "strong presumptions exist in its favor and if it is correct, it is loaded with significant consequences."

The French group reached that conclusion after examining nearly 500 international aeronautical sightings and radar/visual cases, and previously undisclosed pilots' reports. They drew on data from official sources, government authorities, and the air forces of other countries. The findings are contained in a 90-page report titled "UFOs and Defense: What Should We Prepare For?"

"The number of sightings, which are completely unexplained despite the abundance and quality of data from them, is growing throughout the world," the team declared.

The authors note that about 5 percent of sightings on which there is solid documentation cannot be easily attributed to earthly sources, such as secret military exercises. This 5 percent seem "to be completely unknown flying machines with exceptional performances that are guided by a natural or artificial intelligence," they say. Science has developed plausible models for travel from another solar system and for technology that could be used to propel the vehicles, the report points out.

It assures readers that UFOs have demonstrated no hostile acts, "although intimidation maneuvers have been confirmed."

Given the widespread skepticism about UFOs, many will quickly dismiss the generals' "extraterrestrial hypothesis." But it is less easy to do so once the authors' credentials are considered. The study's originators are four-star General Bernard Norlain, former commander of the French Tactical Air Force and military counselor to the prime minister; General Denis Letty, an air force fighter pilot; and Andre Lebeau, former head of the National Center for Space Studies, the French equivalent of NASA.

They formed a 12-member "Committee for In-depth Studies," abbreviated as COMETA, which authored the report. Other contributors included a three-star admiral, the national chief of police, and the head of a government agency studying the subject, as well as scientists and weapons engineers.

Not only does the group stand by its findings, it is urging international action. The writers recommend that France establish "sectorial cooperation agreements with interested European and foreign countries" on the matter of UFOs. They suggest that the European Union undertake diplomatic action with the United States "exerting useful pressure to clarify this crucial issue which must fall within the scope of political and strategic alliances."

Why might the United States be interested - albeit, privately - in a subject often met with ridicule, or considered the domain of the irrational?

For one thing, declassified US government documents show that unexplained objects with extraordinary technical capabilities pose challenges to military activity around the globe. For example, US fighter jets have attempted to pursue UFOs, according to North American Aerospace Defense Command logs and Air Force documents. Iranian and Peruvian air force planes attempted to shoot down unidentified craft in 1976 and 1980. Belgium F-16s armed with missiles pursued a UFO in 1990.

Further, the French report says that there have been "visits

bove secret installations and missile bases" and "military aircraft shadowed" in the United States.

Edgar Mitchell, the Apollo 14 astronaut who was the sixth man to walk on the moon, is one of many supporters of international cooperation on UFOs. Of the French report, he says, "It's significant that individuals of some standing in the government, military, and intelligence community in France came forth with this."

Mitchell, who holds a doctorate from MIT in aeronautics and astronautics, is convinced "at a confidence level above 90 percent, that there is reality to all of this." He says, "People have been digging through the files and investigating for years now. The files are quite convincing. The only thing that's lacking is the official stamp."

Mitchell joins five-star Admiral Lord Hill-Norton, the former head of the British Ministry of Defense, in calling for congressional fact-finding hearings into the UFO question.

Although Congress seems disinclined to pursue the matter, the public's interest in UFOs is undiminished. A ballot initiative underway in Missouri, certified by the secretary of state in March, urges Congress to convene hearings. The initiative states that "the Federal Government's handling of the UFO issue has contributed to the public cynicism toward, and general mistrust of, government."

US Naval Reserve Commander Willard H. Miller has long been communicating this same concern to high level federal officials. With over 30 years in Navy and joint interagency operations with the Defense Department, Miller has participated in a series of previously undisclosed briefings for Pentagon brass about military policy regarding UFOs.

Like many, Miller says he worries that the military's lack of preparation for encounters with unexplained craft could provoke dangerous confrontation when, and if, such an encounter occurs; "precipitous military decisions," he warns, "may lead to unnecessary confusion, misapplication of forces, or possible catastrophic consequences."

And he says he is not alone in his concerns. "There are those in high places in the government who share a growing interest in this subject," Miller reports.

If the US military is concerned about UFOs, it is not saying so publicly. Indeed, the French report chastises the United States for what it calls an "impressive repressive arsenal" on the subject, including a policy of disinformation and military regulations prohibiting public disclosure of UFO sightings.

Air Force Regulation 200-2, "Unidentified Flying Objects Reporting," for example, prohibits the release to the public

and the media of any data about "those objects which are not explainable." An even more restrictive procedure is outlined in the Joint Army Navy Air Force Publication 146, which threatens to prosecute anyone under its jurisdiction - including pilots, civilian agencies, merchant marine captains, and even some fishing vessels - for disclosing reports of sightings relevant to US security.

Although researchers have been able to obtain some information through the Freedom of Information Act, many UFO documents remain classified.

In earlier decades, issues that remain pertinent today were openly discussed. In 1960, for example, US Representative Leonard G. Wolf of Iowa entered an "urgent warning" from R.E. Hillenkoetter, a former CIA director and Navy vice admiral, into the Congressional Record that "certain dangers are linked with unidentified flying objects." Wolf cited General L.M. Chassin, NATO coordinator of Allied Air Service, warning that "If we persist in refusing to recognize the existence of the UFOs, we will end up, one fine day, by mistaking them for the guided missiles of an enemy - and the worst will be upon us."

These concerns were taken seriously enough to be incorporated into the 1971 US-Soviet "Agreement on Measures to Reduce the Outbreak of Nuclear War."

The French report may open the door for nations to be more forthcoming once again. Chile, for example, is openly addressing its own concerns about air safety and UFOs. The now retired chief of the Chilean Air Force has formed a committee with civil aviation specialists to study recent near-collisions of UFOs and civilian airliners.

As the international conversation about UFOs unfolds, sightings continue, as they have for decades. Perhaps the most notable recent US sighting took place in March 1997. Hundreds of people across Arizona reported seeing huge triangular objects, hovering silently in the night sky - a sighting that, as the state's US Senator John McCain noted recently, has "never been fully explained." As recently as Jan. 5, four policemen at different locations in St. Claire County, Illinois, witnessed a huge, brightly lighted, triangular craft flying and hovering at 1,000 feet. One officer reported witnessing extreme rapid motion by the craft that cannot be explained in conventional terms. Nearby Scott Air Force base and the Federal Aviation Administration purport to know nothing.

The Defense Department maintains it can find no information acknowledging the existence of the triangular objects. In response to a suit by curious Arizonans, it provided details of its search to US District Court Judge Stephen M. McNamee of Phoenix. On March 30, McNamee concluded that "a reasonable search was conducted" even though no information was obtained, and he dismissed the case.

There is one government agency in the country that has

taken steps to prepare for a UFO encounter. The Fire Officer's Guide to Disaster Control, second edition - used by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and taught at the seven universities offering degrees in fire science - warns of "UFO hazards," such as electrical fields that cause blackouts, force fields, and physiological effects.

"Do not stand under a UFO that is hovering at low altitudes," the book warns. "Do not touch or attempt to touch a UFO that has landed."

The text leaves little room for skepticism. John E. Mack, professor of psychiatry at Harvard University and a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, stopped being skeptical a long time ago.

"No culture from the beginning of time, no culture from anywhere on the planet, has ever voided the idea of all other intelligent life other than ourselves," he told a UFO conference at the New York Hall of Science two weeks ago. "That's arrogance."

Leslie Kean is a freelance journalist in the San Francisco Bay area. This story ran on page E3 of the Boston Globe on 5/21/2000.

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