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2023-02-14 something up there pt I

Over the last few weeks, there has been an astounding increase in the number of objects shot down by North American air defense. Little is yet known about some of these objects, but it is clearly one of the more dramatic UFO turns in recent memory. Some of the mystery is simply the fog of war, and the time it takes for defense organizations to collect and publicize information. I think that much of it, though, is attributable to a few frustrating factors: the limited familiarity most of the public has with the reality of military operations today; the tendency of the most vocal parts of the public to attempt to fit all events into a preconceived theory (often of the more out-of-this-world kind); and the poor job the media has done of contextualizing these events.

I have written once before about UFOs, and I try not to do it too much for fear of coming off as a crazy person. Still, though, UFOs and their colorful history are one of my greatest interests. Over the last week I have done a lot of yelling at the television and internet comment sections. So here, I am going to attempt something ambitious. I would like to put together for you a possible, even likely, story of the UFO news of the last two years: of AATIP, balloons, and how they all fit together.

Most of what I am about to write is fairly well-established fact, but the way that I connect these facts together is a matter of speculation and opinion. Still, my knowledge of both the history and present of aerial phenomena and the military and intelligence communities, with particular focus on air defense, gives me a set of opinions on this topic that feel extremely obvious to me but are seldom presented in the media or online discussions.

I can't promise I'm correct, but I do hope you'll consider the possibility that the story I will tell here is indeed what has happened: that, far from disclosure, we are currently living out the consequences of a sophisticated adversary, government inefficacy, and one man's eccentric swindle.

And that's where we'll start: with one man.

Robert Bigelow made his wealth in the hospitality business. Budget Suites of America is his marquee brand, but his empire spreads far beyond with a huge hotel and multi-family housing portfolio. Through most of the second half of the 20th century, hotels kept Bigelow busy and made him rich, but by the 1990s he turned towards his true passion: the paranormal.

Most reporting on Bigelow focuses on Bigelow Aerospace (BA). When he's identified as an eccentric, it's usually in regards to BA's research into UFOs. And yet, Bigelow's paranormal investigations begin years earlier: in 1995, he founded the National Institute for Discovery Science, or NIDSci. NIDSci's focus was not UFOs but paranormal

phenomena more broadly, including parapsychology. Bigelow was joined in this venture by his friend, journalist George Knapp.

Knapp is perhaps best known in paranormal communities for his extensive reporting on the claims of Bob Lazar [1]. In the mid 1990s, Knapp turned his focus towards cattle mutilation and related phenomena, the same field of inquiry that made Linda Multon Howe's fame. Cattle mutilation has a long history and in the '90s was seen as one of the more credible forms of paranormal activity. Quite a few paranormal researchers chased mutilated cattle like ambulances, but Knapp had a remarkable lead on the topic: Skinwalker Ranch.

Also known as the Sherman Ranch after the brief owners that first shared stories of its haunting, Skinwalker Ranch is a 512 acre property in rural Utah. It takes its common name from a frightening creature of Navajo belief, "yee naaldlooshii." The Dine feel it to be unwise or at least improper to discuss the Skinwalker, and so I will not dwell on it. We can avoid the topic quite easily, as the relation of Skinwalker Ranch to the Skinwalker itself is loose and a result of white settlers rather than anyone who would know better. What we can certainly say about Skinwalker Ranch is this: it is popularly associated with *spooky shit*.

Summarized briefly, the stories of Skinwalker Ranch encompass just about every paranormal modality you can think of. Crop circles, mutilated cattle, strange lights in the sky, footsteps heard at night, a quiet but disconcerting sound that you cannot escape, bedroom doors locked at night to fend off something that has been scratching at the walls, creatures that are felt rather than seen, bright apparitions like spotlights chasing people on ranch roads, et cetera.

Whether that spooky shit is the consequence of aliens, secret military projects, Bigfoot, ghosts, or otherwise depends largely on who you ask. The legends of Skinwalker Ranch also originate almost entirely with the Shermans who owned it for only two years, which has produced some obvious questions about their veracity. Still, it is one of the most famous sites of paranormal activity and a household name among paranormal enthusiasts [2].

In 1996, Knapp joined with Bigelow and biochemist Colm Kelleher to resolve the mystery of Skinwalker Ranch once and for all, or at least publish a book about it. That year, NIDSci bought the ranch. A small staff of scientists and paranormal enthusiasts was recruited to perform research on the site, and it was otherwise closed to access. It has remained privately owned and guarded since then, perpetuating its paranormal associations.

Bigelow owned Skinwalker Ranch for about twenty years, but serious investigation seems to have only occurred for the first half of that period. In 2005, Knapp and Kelleher published a book, "Hunt for the Skinwalker," presenting their results. The results are, well, minimal. The book is mostly a recounting of the legends told by the Shermans, along with similar encounters during NIDSci's tenure.

In any case, the details of Skinwalker Ranch are not all that important to the story I am telling here. The reason I bring this whole thing up is because of what it tells us about Robert Bigelow. Bigelow is fascinated with paranormal phenomena and has the wealth and connections to bring journalists and scientists into his projects. His projects do not necessarily produce results.

Most of all, remember this: Bigelow has done this before.

George Knapp had another friend of note: the late Harry Reid, a long-serving senator from Nevada. In fact, Knapp and Reid were in conversation on the topic of UFOs the same year that Bigelow bought Skinwalker Ranch. I do not know to what extent Reid was aware of NIDSci's efforts, but I think it must have been at least a bit, as Reid writes in a New York Times editorial that Knapp had invited him to a conference in 1996. In any case, Reid found Knapp credible, and became the principal congressional advocate of serious investigation of UAPs. Reid was quite clear about his interest in UFOs, and while he viewed extraterrestrial origin as only one possibility, he felt it to be a possibility worth investigating.

Here I should discuss terminology. I tend to use the term UFO, or unidentified flying object. The problem with "UFO" is that it is widely understood to refer specifically to phenomena of ostensibly extraterrestrial origin, and it's closely associated with conspiracy theories and loons. In modern government research, the term UAP, for unidentified aerial phenomena, is preferred. This is indeed mostly a matter of optics. I do think the distinction is important, though, as even within the UFO community "UFO" tends to have an alien connotation, and "UAP" is not intended to. The term UAP allows us to be a bit more flexible in our thinking by not assuming the existing body of extraterrestrial-oriented UFO research. From this point on I will prefer the term UAP for consistency with reporting on the topic.

In 1999, Robert Bigelow founded Bigelow Aerospace (BA). The history of BA is confusing in some ways. On the one hand, it seems that Bigelow was genuinely interested in developing aerospace technology, perhaps particularly for the purpose of space tourism... right in line with his history in hospitality. On the other hand, BA was founded right in the middle of the Skinwalker Ranch project, and it's hard to imagine that it wasn't related. BA has held various contracts in space systems development but has never had a very large staff. It is mostly known today for the way that it, too, interacted with Senator Reid: the Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program, or AATIP.

AATIP, by Reid's own account, started in 2007. It was a highly secretive program and so the early details are somewhat obscure. The main gist of AATIP was to collect reports of UAPs and then analyze those incidents to develop a possible explanation. Like many military projects, AATIP was contracted out to private industry. Also like many military projects, the AATIP contract was awarded to the same person who had lobbied for the program's creation: Robert Bigelow, through a division of BA called Bigelow Aerospace Advanced Space Studies or BAASS. Reid makes it fairly clear that AATIP started and ended with Robert Bigelow.

Many aspects of AATIP are unknown or questionable. Perhaps most notable is the question of AATIP's leadership. Long-time military intelligence analyst Luis Elizondo claimed, after his 2012 separation from the military, to have been AATIP's director. The Pentagon denies this, and journalists have questioned various aspects of Elizondo's story, but he has a notable supporter: Senator Reid concurs that Elizondo lead the program. As a general matter it seems fairly certain that Elizondo was at least a senior leader of AATIP, but the confusion underscores the uncertainty around the history, mission, and outcomes of the DoD's UAP efforts in the late 2010s. One gets the impression that no one is telling the whole story, probably because everyone is trying to make themselves look good.

What we do know about AATIP is that the program ended in 2012, and that BAASS produced a lengthy report on its findings. This report has never been released to the public, but it is thought to be largely similar to more recent reports from the DoD's in-house UAP program, mostly summarizing BA's conclusions after attempting to identify the cause of a large number of individual UAP incidents. Various parties involved in AATIP, from

Elizondo to Reid, have made large claims about AATIP having identified possible extraterrestrial technology, but nothing has emerged to substantiate these claims. I find it most likely that they were exaggerations of more commonplace anomalies in AATIP data.

This is where I will diverge somewhat from undisputed history and share my opinion. AATIP demonstrates that at least a few in congress and likely some individuals in the DoD had a genuine interest in UAP. I believe, though, that most journalists have been entirely too credulous in their reporting on AATIP. While the DoD's and likely Reid's interest in the topic were more out of concern for national security, BAASS had something else in mind. One thing we know about Bigelow is that he is fascinated by the paranormal and can spin very little evidence in to a huge story, as he did at Skinwalker Ranch. Moreover, there are clear indications that AATIP did not exactly operated as planned. Besides the general confusion around the exact operating details of AATIP, which suggest that the program operated with very little DoD oversight, I find it likely likely that AATIP diverged entirely from its original purpose.

AATIP was originally funded as a research program into possible advanced weapons systems possessed by adversaries, but it ended as a research program into extraterrestrial presence on Earth. Multiple journalists report that this change in focus occurred at the behest of Bigelow himself, and the Pentagon's awkward termination of the program in 2012 suggests that it did not occur with DoD approval.

I believe that Bigelow won the AATIP contract more by connections and luck than competence, and that AATIP went "off the rails" essentially from the beginning. Bigelow was hunting for aliens and the powerful Senator Reid shared this intention. Through confidence and political savvy, hanging mostly off of Senator Reid's considerable influence on defense spending, Bigelow was able to separate the pentagon from some \$22 million to fund his personal hobby. While I believe his passion was real and his intent good, AATIP was largely Bigelow's flight of fancy and was not aligned with actual DoD interests in the topic. As senior leadership in the executive branch and Congress became more aware of the situation, AATIP was quietly ended. To support its own interest in adversarial systems, the Pentagon replaced AATIP with an internal program: the UAP Task Force, later reorganized as the All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office.

The former members of the AATIP did not take to this change well and attempted to pivot their work from government funding to the private sector. These efforts eventually reached wealthy UFO enthusiast Tom DeLonge, of Blink-182 fame. DeLonge had by this point connected with Hal Puthoff. Puthoff is an electrical engineer, former Scientologist, and paranormal researcher long known for his research into psychics and remote viewing. Puthoff worked in these fields in an opportune time: most who are familiar with the concept of remote viewing know of it because of the military's efforts depicted in "The Men who Stare at Goats." Puthoff was directly involved in these programs as a researcher at Stanford University spinoff and defense contractor SRI, which administered some of the military's psychic research on contract. After these efforts, Puthoff founded EarthTech International, which continues research in parapsychology, cold fusion, and other fields which can be generally categorized as "woo."

DeLonge, Puthoff, and former CIA agent and UFO experienter Jim Semivan founded an organization called To the Stars Academy of Arts and Sciences (TTSA) in 2017. TTSA was somewhere between a spinoff and new parent organization for a media company called To The Stars that had distributed records and books for Tom DeLonge. Through an odd series of announcements, TTSA basically transformed from DeLonge's private record label to a rough continuation of AATIP, but one that would be publicly funded through the sales of media. While TTSA has made claims to extraterrestrial technology and breakthroughs in UAP

research, almost nothing that they've put out has ever made any sense, and unsurprisingly the organization has faded into obscurity. TTSA's ambitions to original UAP research basically disappeared by 2018, and today TTSA is little more than DeLonge's online merch store. Given the questions around Elizondo's history, it's unclear how much TTSA had to do with AATIP in the first place, but it certainly didn't amount to anything.

This whole matter of AATIP and TTSA is sort of a flash in the pan, but it set critical context for events to come. The DoD had invested real money and effort into the question of UAPs. The organization that spent that money, AATIP/BAASS, and its loose successor TTSA, seemed to very openly consider UAP research to be research into extraterrestrial presence and other paranormal phenomena. The media, for the most part, has not differentiated between *Bigelow's* interests and the *Pentagon's* interests in this regard. I believe that *Bigelow* was very much hunting for aliens, but the *Pentagon* was not... the Pentagon was looking for explanations for UAP, and aliens were probably not high on the list of expected outcomes. It does not help matters that Senator Reid seems to have been more on Bigelow's side of this divide.

The real crux of the contemporary UAP issue is that UAPs returned to public attention due to Bigelow's eccentric goose chase and DeLonge's self-promotion, but Bigelow's DoD contract and Elizondo's military past gave these otherwise incredulous stories the imprimatur of government. The media's unquestioning reporting on AATIP and even, to some extent, TTSA gave the impression that these were sophisticated programs endorsed by the government. In fact, they were haphazard efforts by just a few people with long histories in quackery.

AATIP was public knowledge years earlier but became a major news item in 2017 due to DeLonge and Elizondo's promotion of TTSA. Bigelow, DeLonge, Elizondo, and even Senator Reid openly spoke about AATIP's ostensible extraterrestrial research, while the DoD declined to speak about an apparently classified program. In fact, it was not until some time later that it became evident that DoD had continued UAP research at all after 2012, and that research was done under conditions of secrecy as well.

What the public heard is that the Pentagon was hunting for UFOs. How that related to actual DoD interests or programs was irrelevant, because the Pentagon wouldn't talk about it and the media didn't particularly care. The UFOs made headlines. Pentagon UAP reporting procedures and incident databases were boring details.

This particular outcome of the 2017 news cycle, a series of crazed front-page articles that I believe to have been nothing but Bigelow and DeLonge promoting their own business ventures, massively influenced the way UAPs are viewed by the public today. What was really Bigelow's personal lark enabled by his Senate connections became a new MKULTRA but less sinister. No one took it seriously. Well, except for people who thought UAPs were definitely aliens, who took it as seriously as they do Bob Lazar.

What about the Pentagon's side of the story, though? Why *was* the military interested in UAPs, and why did it continue UAP research (and, it seems, expand it) after Bigelow's involvement ended? I believe that we recently saw the answer floating eastwards across the northern United States.

The thing is, aliens are one of the less likely explanations for UAPs, and to be honest they are one of the less interesting. Most UAPs, it stands to reason, originate here on earth. And that is very much a military concern.

Foo fighters, strange aircraft reported by military pilots, are just about as old as military aviation. The term "foo fighter" comes from WWII, and indeed WWII was lousy

with strange aerial encounters. It has always been assumed that the vast majority of foo fighters were mistaken perceptions, but they have always been of interest to military intelligence because of the possibility that they were simply misidentified enemy aircraft. From this perspective the strange, otherworldly behavior of foo fighters is all the more interesting: they might represent enemy aircraft of a novel kind.

The mass publicity around UAPs in 2017 spurred a great deal of public interest which resulted in some media reporting on UAP incidents as they happened. The Drive's Tyler Rogoway has perhaps become today's Linda Multon Howe but more credible, as he has repeatedly written some of the most detailed analysis of UAP incidents. Put together, Rogoway's articles on UAPs from 2017 to the present don't come together into any particular narrative except for the broad one of challenges to airspace sovereignty.

Airspace sovereignty is a general term used to describe a state's control of its airspace. The United States exercises air sovereignty through the civilian operations of the FAA and the military operations of NORAD, a joint US-Canadian command that shares the FAA's radar network to observe for Soviet bombers and other aerial threats. Obviously Soviet bombers are no longer a great concern, but the technical and bureaucratic infrastructure of NORAD are still mostly organized around that threat.

The FAA-Air Force Joint Surveillance System consists of radar instruments that are about 30 years old at the newest, with some equipment dating back to the '60s still in use. It is a common misconception that the FAA, NORAD, or someone has complete information on aircraft in the skies. In reality, this is far from true. Primary radar is inherently limited in range and sensitivity, and the JSS is a compromise aimed mostly at providing safety of commercial air routes and surveillance off the coasts. Air traffic control and air defense radar is blind to small aircraft in many areas and even large aircraft in some portions of the US and Canada, and that's without any consideration of low-radar-profile or "stealth" technology. With limited exceptions such as the Air Defense Identification Zones off the coasts and the Washington DC region, neither NORAD nor the FAA expect to be able to identify aircraft in the air. Aircraft operating under visual flight rules routinely do so without filing any type of flight plan, and air traffic controllers outside of airport approach areas ignore these radar contacts unless asked to do otherwise.

The idea I am trying to convey is that airspace sovereignty is a tricky problem. The US and Canada are very large countries and so the airspace over them is very large as well. Surveilling that airspace is expensive and complex. Since the decline of the Cold War there has been no interest in spending the money that would be required for complete airspace awareness, and indeed the ability of the FAA and military to field airspace surveillance technology seems to have declined over recent decades rather than increased. We don't really know what's out there all the time, and it seems very possible that a determined adversary might be able to sneak in and out of US airspace largely undetected.

There are incidents and accidents, hints and allegations, that suggest that this concern is not merely theoretical. In late 2017, air traffic controllers tracked an object on radar in northern California and southern Oregon. Multiple commercial air crews, asked to keep an eye out, saw the object and described it as, well, an airplane. It was flying at a speed and altitude consistent with a jetliner and made no strange maneuvers. It was really all very ordinary except that no one had any idea who or what it was. The inability to identify this airplane spooked air traffic controllers who engaged the military. Eventually fighter jets were dispatched from Portland, but by the time they were in the air controllers had lost radar contact with the object. The fighter pilots made an effort to locate the object, but unsurprisingly considering the limited range of the target acquisition radar onboard fighters, they were unsuccessful. One

interpretation of this event is that everyone involved was either crazy or mistaken. Perhaps it had been swamp gas all along. Another interpretation is that someone flew a good sized jet aircraft into, over, and out of the United States without being identified or intercepted. Reporting around the incident suggests that the military both took it seriously and does not want to talk about it.

This incident is not unique. Over the last few years there have been multiple instances of commercial aircrews reporting unidentified aircraft, which were sometimes fantastical and sometimes quite mundane. Fewer incidents of radar contact with unknown aircraft are known, but these are less likely to make it to the press. Moreover, air traffic controllers with the FAA and, apparently, military air defense controllers both have a tendency to filter their radar scopes to hide objects that are not "of interest." Several aviation accidents in the last five years have resulted in investigations that found that radar did detect concerns such as flocks of birds but those contacts were not displayed due to the configuration of the radar scope. This suggests that controllers may have been willfully ignorant of some oddities, not unsurprisingly since they are focused primarily on the aircraft with which they have contact.

All of this sounds a little bit wild, and a little bit unbelievable, right? That's one of the biggest problems that DoD seems to grapple with. As long as military aviators have been seeing strange things, they have been laughed at for it. Skeptical reactions are not at all undeserved, but the DoD has communicated that a major motivation of current UAP efforts are to encourage people to report strange things in the sky, instead of staying quiet for fear of sounding crazy.

To be clear, the vast majority of these incidents are almost certainly mistakes of some kind. Perceptual effects can make stars appear to move strangely, atmospheric phenomenon can appear as solid objects, and sometimes you just get disoriented and something very ordinary looks very strange. But there is a matter of baby and bath water. Even though the majority of UAP sightings amount to nothing, it is possible, even likely, that a few of them were sightings of real objects. Real objects which were not tracked by air traffic controllers or air defense. Real objects which represent a challenge to airspace sovereignty.

And that brings us up to a few weeks ago: there was evidence, scant evidence but still evidence, that unidentified objects were operating in US airspace. Troublingly, these objects were sometimes reported close to military installations, and even dwelling near them for extended periods of time. The DoD, I believe, was deeply concerned that at least some of these reports might be indications that an adversary was successfully placing aerial surveillance equipment over the United States undetected. And that's why the Pentagon has spent years encouraging military personnel to report UAP sightings, and analyzing those reports for plausible explanations: not because they might be aliens, but because they might be the enemy.

And then, something happened with a balloon. What's up with that?? We'll talk about it next time, in part II.

[1] I will not expand on the story of Bob Lazar here, but for those not familiar it is useful to know that Lazar's stories of secret underground alien bases and military collaboration with aliens are both completely discredited and extremely influential on modern UFO thought.

[2] Here I will caution you that the horror film "Skinwalker Ranch" is both almost entirely unrelated to the real story (or even doubtful claims) about the place and, well, bad.