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Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Update

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The All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), which was formed in 2022 and established in 2023 as the lead government agency for UAP efforts, documented 291 reports of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena in 2023 (The Department of Defense, 2023). The AARO is in the process of consolidating the disjointed work of multiple federal departments and starting to study UAPs. Since the major media attention on UAPs in early 2023, especially one concerning a Chinese spy balloon, coordinating UAP responses has been a major area of governmental action. Since that incident, there have not been other high-profile UAPs that could pose a threat to American security (The Department of Defense, 2023). However, this year has still seen extensive work on understanding UAPs in the American government.

In late December, President Biden passed the 2024 National Defense Act Authorization (NDAA), considered a yearly ‘must pass bill’ that is worked on throughout the year and must eventually be passed by Congress. Included in this bill was an amendment that will require the creation of a “Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena Records Collection” in the National Archives (Vincent, 2023). This collection will show copies of all records related to government research of unidentified anomalous phenomena, as well as other “technologies of unknown origin, and non-human intelligence,” 25 years after their publication (Vincent, 2023). This will necessitate multi-departmental effort, since every governmental office with pertinent information related to UAPs will be required to prepare then disclose their records within 300 days of the bill’s passage.

Of course, with the ongoing debate between transparency and national security, there will be limits on what information can be made publicly available, even after 25 years. A clause to the amendment ensures that some UAP-related records can be indefinitely postponed if they present a threat to US security, especially matters related to military, intelligence, and foreign relations (Mizokami, 2023). Publication of records

can also be postponed if it would possibly endanger personal privacy, especially that of witnesses (Mizokami, 2023).

This landmark legislation has two main goals. First, it is intended to increase public confidence in the government – the legislation is modeled after the JFK Assassination Records Collection Act, which was enacted thirty years after JFK’s assassination to combat a similar problem of widespread distrust in the government stemming from a lack of accessible information (Senate Democrats, 2023). Improving public trust in government is a bipartisan goal – as calls on the right to ‘drain the swamp’ and on the left to strengthen democratic institutions show, transparency continues to be a stated ideal of both parties (Saad, 2023). As the 2024 elections inch closer, this ideal of transparency becomes even more salient, which helped to motivate the bipartisan support for this amendment (Vincent, 2023).

Second, the creation of a publicly accessible record collection about UAPs is meant to signal to the American public that concerns about UAPs are taken seriously, thereby destigmatizing UAPs. Both Senators Rubio R-FL and Gillibrand D-NY listed stigma as a major factor in their support of the amendment, with Rubio commenting “We’ve taken some important steps over the last few years to increase transparency and reduce stigmas, but more needs to be done” (Senate Democrats, 2023). Rubio added that “this is yet another step in that direction, and one that I hope will spur further cooperation from the executive branch.” The NSC, as part of the executive branch, would have broad influence on actions taken to study, declassify, and combat UAPs. This effort to destigmatize UAPs is essential for national security efforts, since the stigma associated with UAPs has been shown to discourage civilians from officially reporting UAPs to the government, which hampers governmental ability to study or act against a threat to American safety (Senate Democrats, 2023). In addition, this stigma affects researchers, officials, and members of the military, who feel dissuaded from pursuing official action, taking up jobs that center on UAPs, and more (Naughtie, 2023). A report by NASA echoed this sentiment, noting that this stigma leads to data attrition, which eventually results in decreased national security.

In another attempt to rectify the lack of serious recognition of UAP reports, the Subcommittee on National Security, the Border, and Foreign Affairs held a hearing on UAPs in which they heard testimony from three whistleblowers from the military. These whistleblowers came forward to claim knowledge of a long running reverse engineering program of recovered UAPs, as well as that the U.S. has found non-human “biologics” from alleged crash sites (Romo, 2023). The Pentagon inquired into their reports, which the Defense Department quickly disputed in a statement. The whistleblowers testified that after coming forward, they were victims of harassment so intense that they called it “administrative terrorism” for its severe consequences on their families’ lives and mental health (Romo, 2023). Every testimonial ended in a call to decrease the stigma around UAPs, both for national security, since according to one estimate, only 5% of UAP sightings are reported, as well as for the sake of the researchers and officials who work on UAPs (Romo, 2023).

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