

What's Up With All These Pentagon UFO Programs?

Understanding the transition from UAPTF to AOIMSG to AARO ...

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When Luis Elizondo resigned from the Pentagon, it seems like the government's UFO investigation went with him. Not long after, *The New York Times* published an article called [Glowing Auras and 'Black Money'](#) which revealed that mysterious effort and sparked a renewed public interest on the file.

The precise nature of Elizondo's "Advanced Aerospace Threat Identification Program" (2012-2017) has been [hotly contested](#). While it would benefit from a detailed examination at a later date, what can be said with certainty is that his effort inspired a series of very official successor programs that are not in dispute.

Today, I'm going to walk you through these recent Pentagon UFO programs so that you can

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[UAPTF] The “Unofficial” Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force

(September 2018 - August 2020) Approx. 2 years.

In late 2018, an Intelligence Officer named Jay Stratton accepted a job in the Pentagon’s Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI). Stratton had recently made the move to a senior executive level and was assigned a pretty standard role assessing conventional threats to the U.S. Navy. [1](#)

But in the wake of that *New York Times* article, UFOs were drawing more and more public attention. Two of the most well-profiled modern incidents involved the Navy and Naval Aviators were now starting to testify behind closed doors to Congress. [2](#)

Stratton was one of the only members of ONI with anything approaching UFO experience. In the late 2000’s he had been involved with a formal Pentagon effort to study the issue (the Advanced Aerospace Weapon System Application Program - AAWSAP) and he had maintained a connection to Elizondo’s AATIP effort throughout the 2010’s.

With that background in mind, the head of ONI selected Stratton to look into it **on behalf of the U.S. Navy**. To do this, she granted him “Direct Liaison Authority” (DIRLAUTH) where Stratton was empowered to go seek voluntary cooperation across the government. In Stratton’s own words his effort was considered a voluntary “partnership” and lacked the legal status of a task force. But as more areas of the defense establishment began to play ball, Stratton and others began to informally call their effort “The UAP Task Force” or “UAPTF.” [3](#) [4](#)

Stratton's work during this period accomplished three major things:

1. He wrote two "Intelligence Position Reports" which advocated for a serious look at the issue. These reports were widely circulated across the defense establishment, with one source noting that they "went viral" inside the intelligence community. [5](#)
2. He got the Navy to implement a formal reporting procedure for pilots that encountered UAPs so that the stigma would no longer be a barrier to data collection; [6](#) and
3. He lobbied the major Congressional Defense Committees for help. This resulted in an obscure legislative direction by the *Senate Select Committee on Intelligence* which (a) expressed support for his effort, and (b) requested a public report on his findings within 180 days. [7](#)

Shortly after the Senate Select Committee's comments passed through a legislative vehicle called the "Intelligence Authorization Act," the Pentagon announced the formal creation of a UAP Task Force. [8](#) This upgraded Stratton's unofficial effort into an official one leading to the:

[UAPTF] The "Official" UAP Task Force

(August 2020 - November 2021) Approx. 1 year 3 months.

The creation of an official UAP Task Force introduced some new variables into this equation. Stratton would remain in charge, and **the U.S. Navy would continue to lead the file**, but the task force would now report up to the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security. This nested its results at the top of the Pentagon bureaucracy, where, it would now have some oversight and interest from the Secretary of Defense.

The creation of a legal Task Force also changed Stratton's staffing capability. Where before he had acted pretty much alone, now the major armed services branches and intelligence agencies could loan permanent staff to his effort. This resulted in a variety of secondments which notably included Travis Taylor (from the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command)⁹ and David Grusch (from the National Reconnaissance Office).¹⁰ It's still unclear how many other branches participated, though it's unlikely the team would have exceeded about 17 people.¹¹

During this period, Stratton and Travis Taylor were chiefly responsible for writing the public UFO report requested by the Senate. This [Preliminary Assessment on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena](#) was delivered on June 25, 2021 and while it suffered from tight timelines and some collaboration issues, it was the first public UFO report to be published in over 50 years.¹²

While efforts continued on above board analysis of modern UFO reports, Stratton also decided to make use of a particular kind of security clearance (Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmentalized Information Clearance) held by David Grusch. It is during this period that he assigned Grusch the task of looking into rumors of an alleged "off-book" UFO program designed to recover and reverse-engineer crashed craft. It is from this direction that Grusch would later claim to have found significant evidence of that program's existence and he would eventually make a whistleblower complaint flagging that effort as operating illegally outside of Congressional oversight.¹³

While all three of these figures have spoken highly of their time together, the verdict on the quality of the UAPTF is not unanimous. An anonymous DoD official that worked with the task force would later note that he felt "Stratton was a complete nutjob" and that "most of what the task force did was a complete and utter waste of money." It's unclear to what extent these

comments represent the feelings of all staff, but that figure did note that he spearheaded complaints up the Pentagon's chain of command and they seemed to have an effect. [14](#)

By June 2021 Stratton was out as Director, being replaced by a more cautious bureaucrat named Brennan McKernan. [15](#) [16](#) The new UAPTF concluded that one of the errors of its previous leadership was a miscategorization of Chinese spy balloons and other foreign drones as UAPs due to an enthusiasm for the "extraordinary." [17](#) While the Pentagon now knew this, it wasn't yet clear to Congress which was trying to make the office even more prominent within the Department of Defense. But their direction in a legislative vehicle called the "National Defense Authorization Act" didn't specify a name for this enhanced effort, so, armed with this new theory about balloons and drones, the Pentagon opted to choose it for them: [18](#)

[AOIMSG] Airborne Object Identification and Management Synchronization Group

(November 2021 - July 2022) Approx. 8 months.

One of the more remarkable features of the AOIMSG was that its Director was never named. This was the first time the program had left the U.S. Navy and its unclear whether Brennan McKernan stayed on in any capacity. Based on some information provided by the Pentagon, it seems that another defense official (Sean Kirkpatrick) began leading the program in "early 2022" but few details as to its original scope or intent were ever provided to the public. [19](#)

With this new structure, **the program would now be run directly out of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security** (Ronald Moultrie) with oversight provided by

the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Kathleen Hicks). A separate “Airborne Object Identification and Management Executive Council” (AOIMEXEC) was supposed to act as a vehicle for every other service branch to advise the group on their activities. ²⁰

What were those activities? Their advice was supposed to be targeted at (1) identifying objects in the air over military training ranges, and (2) clearing safety of flight issues that might harm military pilots. This scoped down vision got off to a bad start when just one month into its existence, legislation required this office to re-task onto UFOs. ²¹ By the time Ronald Moultrie (representing AOIMSG) and Scott Bray (representing the old UAPTF) showed up to [a hearing of the House Intelligence Committee](#), it was clear that Congressional interest was heading toward a broader UFO investigation.

Once again, the DoD was forced to reverse course, and, complying with the 2022 NDAA, they created a new organization with a new name. This time public-facing communication would be better, and, frankly, the name would be to ...

[AARO] The All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office

(July 2022 - Present)

AARO was announced with a clear mandate and a clearly identified Director (Sean Kirkpatrick). And unlike the previous programs run by the Pentagon, Kirkpatrick was empowered to speak openly about his interest in the topic and his plans for the future. ²²

Kirkpatrick was himself a practicing scientist with two patents under his belt and in an early

interview advocated for strict application of the scientific method. This dovetailed nicely with AARO's expanded mandate to look at "anomalous, unidentified space, airborne, submerged and transmedium objects" to mitigate "any associated threats ... to national security." ²³ Now, everything was back on the table and it paid off in the early goodwill the office was able to generate.

One of its first acts was to release its [2022 Annual Report on Unidentified Aerial Phenomena](#). While the report did come a little late, it was mostly prepared in the period of transition from AOIMSG to AARO and the public didn't seem overly bothered by the delay. Its results were largely overshadowed a month later when the Chinese Spy Balloon flap (resulting in the downing of four unidentified objects over North America) kicked off a bigger discussion about UFOs and how, at least some of them, could be explained by conventional means. AARO shined in that discussion and, for a few months at least, its leadership remained largely uncontroversial in UFO circles.

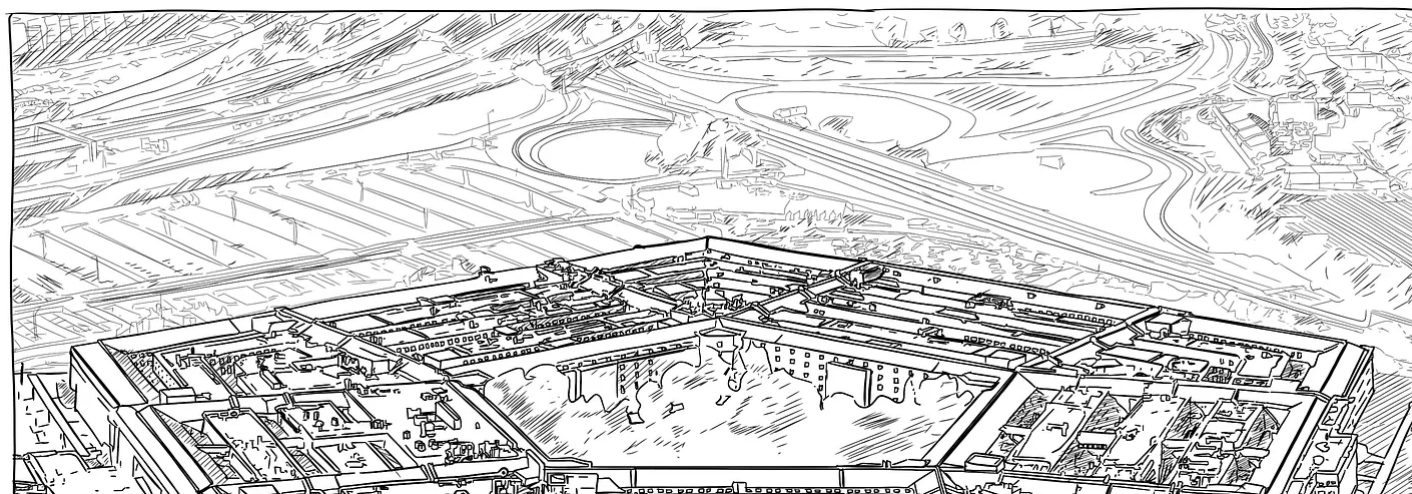
But this office has always been dominated by a tension between the old and the new. And in June 2023 that tension boiled over when a former member of the Navy's UAP Task Force (David Grusch) went public with allegations of a massive government coverup. According to Grusch, he found significant evidence of an illegal U.S. intelligence program to recover and reverse engineer crashed UFOs. He made formal whistleblower complaints to the Department of Defense Inspector General and the Intelligence Community Inspector General, where the latter deemed his findings both "credible" and "urgent." ²⁴

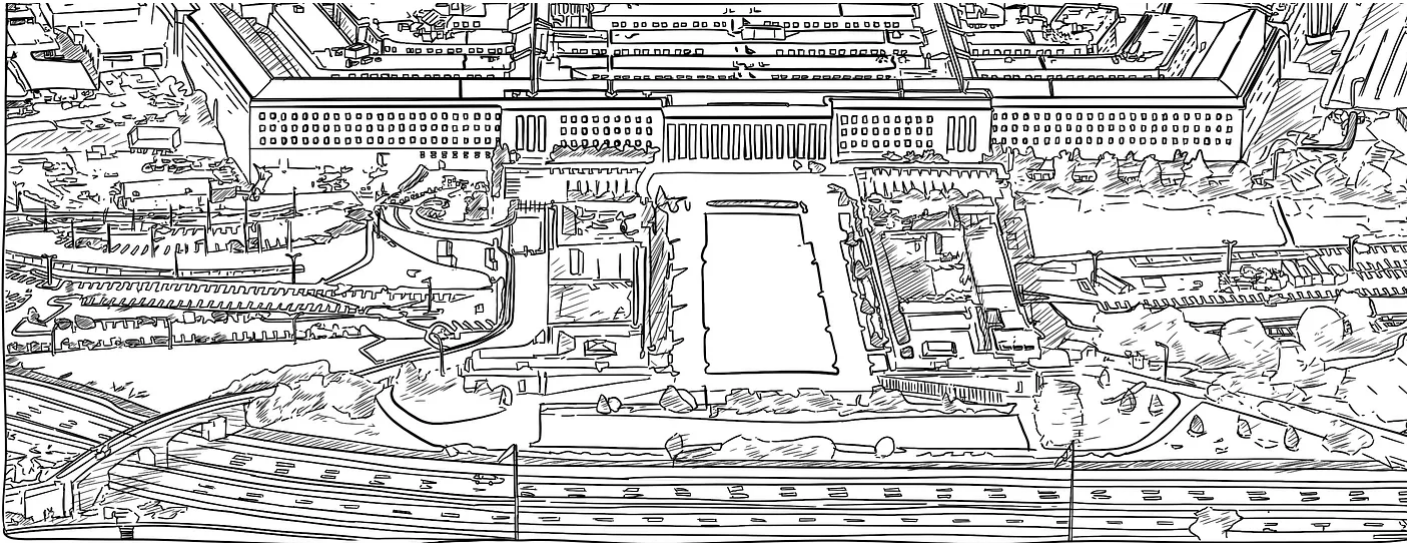
Thus began a direct conflict between David Grusch and Sean Kirkpatrick, where Grusch said he had debriefed Kirkpatrick on his findings as early as April 2022. ²⁵ Kirkpatrick maintained that

he was able to see no evidence that supported them, but he also acknowledged that he lacked some information collecting authority (Title 50) [26](#) and had not seen a copy of the complaint submitted by Grusch. [27](#)

When the House Oversight Committee [held a hearing](#) that substantially talked about Grusch's claim, Kirkpatrick released a statement that called it "insulting" to the employees of AARO. [28](#) This did not play well with many curious Americans and its unclear to what extent this had an impact on the organization of his office. Shortly after his statement, **the effort was once again upgraded** from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security to the **Deputy Secretary of Defense** (Kathleen Hicks). [29](#) By November 2023, Sean Kirkpatrick was out as Director being replaced by a long-time intelligence bureaucrat named Timothy Phillips. [30](#)

With yet another leadership change, who knows what the future has in store for the Pentagon's most recent (publicly acknowledged) UFO program. But at least one article has outlined the priority of Kathleen Hicks ... [a name change](#).





P.S. Do you think this might clear things up for someone you know? If so, please:

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- 1 “John F. Stratton Jr Biography.” United States Department of the Navy, June 21, 2021. <https://www.secnav.navy.mil/donhr/About/Senior-Executives/Biographies/Stratton,%20J.pdf>.
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 - 3 Corbell, Jeremy, and George Knapp. “EPISODE #3: The Pentagon’s Top UFO Hunter.” Weaponized Podcast, February 7, 2023. https://youtu.be/hsyj481bq_U?si=vGg-C-6l6v0J0GPM. At [1h 0min 14s](#).
 - 4 Note: DIRLAUTH authority is a commonly used term in the Defense Establishment. One definition

provided by the Air Force describes the authority as: “that authority granted by a commander (any level) to a subordinate to directly consult or coordinate an action with a command or agency within or outside of the granting command.” This definition was obtained from an Air Force [document](#) on Command Authorities and Relationships.

- 5 McMillan, Tim. “Fast Movers and Transmedium Vehicles - Inside the Pentagon’s UAP Task Force.” The Debrief, December 2, 2020. <https://thedebrief.org/fast-movers-and-transmedium-vehicles-the-pentagons-uap-task-force/>.
- 6 Bender, Bryan. “U.S. Navy Drafting New Guidelines for Reporting UFOs.” Politico, April 23, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/04/23/us-navy-guidelines-reporting-ufos-1375290>.
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- 8 “Establishment of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force.” United States Department of Defense, August 14, 2020. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2314065/establishment-of-unidentified-aerial-phenomena-task-force/>.
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- 10 Merchant, Nomaan. “Whistleblower Tells Congress the US Is Concealing ‘multi-Decade’ Program That Captures UFOs.” The Associated Press, July 26, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/ufos-uaps-congress-whistleblower-spy-aliens-ba8a8cfba353d7b9de29c3d906a69ba7>.
- 11 Note: This estimate is drawn from the list of DoD/IC offices noted as collaborators on the June 25, 2021

- Preliminary Assessment of UAPs [Report](#). There are 17 offices listed as collaborators.
- 12 Knapp, George. "Physicist Reveals He's a UFO Hunter for the Pentagon." *Mystery Wire*, June 22, 2022. <https://www.mysterywire.com/ufo/ufo-scientist-speaks-publicly-for-the-first-time-on-decades-of-work/>.
 - 13 Kean, Leslie, and Ralph Blumenthal. "Intelligence Officials Say U.S. Has Retrieved Craft of Non-Human Origin." *The Debrief*, June 5, 2023. <https://thedebrief.org/intelligence-officials-say-u-s-has-retrieved-non-human-craft/>.
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 - 19 "Dr. Sean M. Kirkpatrick Director, All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO)." U.S. Department of Defense, July 20, 2022. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Jul/20/2003039076/-1/-1/1/DR-SEAN-M-KIRKPATRICK-BIOGRAPHY.PDF>.

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- 21 Note: The “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022” was signed by the President on December 27, 2021. Among other things, the content of [this act](#) required the Pentagon to re-home this office in a different (read: better) part of the Pentagon bureaucracy, investigate UAPs more widely, establish a “science plan” to help explain them, and begin a semi-annual briefing schedule in addition to submitting an annual report.
- 22 “USD(I&S) Ronald Moultrie and Dr. Sean Kirkpatrick Media Roundtable on the All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office.” United States Department of Defense, December 16, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3249303/usdis-ronald-moultrie-and-dr-sean-kirkpatrick-media-roundtable-on-the-all-domai/>.
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<https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/to-receive-testimony-on-the-mission-activities-oversight-and-budget-of-the-all-domain-anomaly-resolution-office>. At [39min 59s](#).

- [27](#) In a [personal statement](#) posted after the hearing, Sean Kirkpatrick indicated that “some information reportedly provided to Congress [regarding David Grusch] has not been provided to AARO, raising additional questions about the true commitment to transparency by some Congressional elements.”
- [28](#) Merchant, Nomann, and Tara Copp. “The UFO Congressional Hearing Was ‘Insulting’ to US Employees, a Top Pentagon Official Says.” The Associated Press, July 29, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/congress-ufos-uaps-pentagon-aliens-631ad4d174ee9559580935ec11afcf3f>.
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- [30](#) Degges, Ireland. “AARO Shakes Up Executive Team With 2 New Leadership Changes; Kathleen Hicks
Comments Executive Gov, November 8, 2023. <https://executivegov.com/2023/11/aaro-shakes-up-executive-team-with-2-new-leadership-changes-kathleen-hicks-quoted/>.



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