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District 9 is lucky to have avoided a close encounter with the Pentagon

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South African UFO drama District 9 is one of the most anticipated films of the summer. But had it come out of Hollywood – and to the attention of the US government – it might never have made it to the big screen in tact

Robbie Graham and [Matthew Alford](#)

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They may be elusive in the sky, but at the cinema at least, [UFOs](#) are hard to miss. For 60 years extraterrestrials have been a relatively sure-fire means of getting bums on seats.

District 9 is yet more testimony of the public's appetite for space alien mythology. Yet ironically, cinema was originally seen as a medium by which the CIA could debunk UFO theories. In 1953, the CIA-backed [Robertson Panel decided to](#) "strip [the] aura of mystery" from UFOs through the use of "mass media such as television [and] motion pictures".

The panel's strenuous spirit of denial, for a while at least, drove government attempts to control media output on UFOs. Thirteen years after it convened, panel member Thornton Page privately admitted that he helped organise a documentary ([now viewable on YouTube](#)) based around its conclusions, despite his own sympathies about the existence of flying saucers.

The same impulse was evidently at work when, in 1958, according to producer John Ellis, the Air Force (from 1948 – 1969 the military branch assigned by the government to official UFO investigations) insisted on altering "every single page" of a script for a saucer-themed episode of the Steve Canyon TV series. In original drafts, Canyon defends the integrity of UFO witnesses and expresses a desire to learn about creatures from space first-hand. In the vetted version – and in line with the Robertson Panel's recommendations – Canyon's enthusiasm is replaced with scepticism or plain indifference, and a plot strand concerning the recovery of suspected alien debris has been scrapped. Such leverage was possible because the series itself was backed by the Air Force (along with Chesterfield Cigarettes). It was only through a last act of defiance on the part of the show's producers toward the end of its run in 1959 that the episode was screened at all.

[Steven Spielberg](#) claimed in an interview with an Australian film journal Cinema Papers that NASA sent him [a] "very angry" 20-page letter protesting about the script for Close Encounters of the Third Kind. According to Spielberg, they were afraid the film would trigger an epidemic of UFO sightings, just as Jaws had apparently heightened the public's fear of sharks. The director declined to alter his script, and the film was made without the support of NASA.

But the government has not always tried to dampen interest in UFOs. According to Oscar-winning animator Ward Kimball, in the

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mid-1950s, the Air Force offered Walt Disney "real" UFO footage for exclusive use in a documentary, the alleged purpose of which was to acclimatise the public to the reality of extraterrestrials. When the offer was withdrawn, Kimball challenged the Air Force liaison officer for the project – a colonel, who told him that "there was indeed plenty of UFO footage, but that neither [Kimball], nor anyone else was going to get access to it".

A similar approach was adopted in 1972 when the Department of Defence leant unprecedented co-operation to film-maker Robert Emenegger on a major documentary in which high-ranking officers talked open-mindedly about aliens. Again, "real" UFO footage – this time allegedly showing the actual landing of an extraterrestrial craft at Holloman Air Force Base – was offered, only to be withdrawn at the eleventh hour. The resulting Golden Globe-nominated feature, [UFOs: Past, Present and Future, retitled and re-released](#) in the late 70s, nevertheless included a few seconds of previously unseen footage courtesy of the government – what appears to be a self-luminescent UFO descending slowly in the distance.

Government involvement in alien-themed movies continues to the present day. Co-operation between the makers of 1996's Independence Day and the Pentagon broke down in part because the Pentagon specifically requested that "any government connection" to Area 51 or to Roswell be eliminated from the film – a request apparently based on the ridiculous assumption that both the Roswell Incident and Area 51 were not already known to half of America.

More recently, Disney's Race to Witch Mountain had [military and CIA advisors on set](#) for the entirety of its shoot to ensure the filmmakers remained "honest", and the Transformers franchise, which taps into the rich vein of UFO mythology, has the Pentagon's "full cooperation."

Perhaps efforts such as those involving Emenegger and Kimball are part of a smokescreen for other government projects. CIA records show that as early as 1952, the Agency's then-director Walter Bedell Smith was sufficiently concerned about UFOs to discuss seriously, "the possible offensive or defensive utilisation of these phenomena for psychological warfare purposes".

A more esoteric explanation was provided by Lieutenant Colonel Phillip J Corso, who served on the National Security Council during the Eisenhower administration and was formerly chief of the Pentagon's foreign technology desk. Corso claimed that the production of flying saucer movies was actively encouraged by government-led UFO study groups during the 1950s. The goal, he claimed, was simultaneously to fictionalise UFOs (through their association with Hollywood entertainment) and to acclimatise the public to UFO reality - manipulating their perceptions of the phenomenon in the process.

Corso referred to this strategy as "camouflage through limited disclosure." "We never hid the truth from anybody," he said, "We just camouflaged it. It was always there [in documents, books, TV shows and movies], people just didn't know what to look for or recognise it for what it was when they found it. And they found it over and over again."

So, it seems official policy regarding media representations of UFO phenomena has shifted from project to project, from decade to decade, between debunking efforts at one end of the spectrum and, at the other, more subversive attempts to monitor and even seed the content of UFO-related media for purposes of perception-management. If nothing else, this should provide the incentive for us to sit up and pay greater attention to the fleets of flying saucer movies that will undoubtedly continue to land in our multiplexes.

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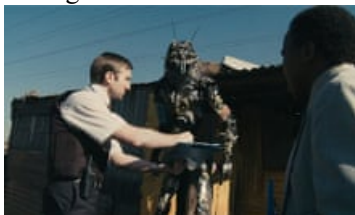


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