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For July 12, 1996

What if they come? U.S. has no plan to deal with aliens

By Patricia Edmonds and Peter Eisler
GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON - The aliens waged "War of the Worlds" in 1938 by radio. They invaded again in the 1953 film version. They're coming to destroy us this summer in "Independence Day."

And the Earthlings still have no response plan?

That's right. There's no strategy. No scenario. No hot line.

Operation Kick-Some-**Alien**-Butt just doesn't exist.

"Our policy is, if someone has (an **alien**) sighting and they feel they are in imminent danger, they are to contact their local authorities - the sheriff, the police," says Air Force Lt. Col. Mack McLaurin, who handles UFO inquiries for the Pentagon.

In other words, if, as in "Independence Day," someone were to observe intergalactic battleships raining fireballs onto the White House and Capitol, causing them to vaporize, the proper response would be .□.□. to call the D.C. cops.

To true believers, this might seem a cavalier response. Our federal government - which still stockpiles the helium it would need to wage blimp warfare - has absolutely no strategy to prevent invading aliens from slicing up our cities like so many Thanksgiving turkeys.

No plan, says the White House.

No plan, says the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

No plan, says the Secret Service.

No plan, says McLaurin - at least not since 1969, when the Air Force scrapped Project Blue Book, its official UFO response program. "How can we develop a plan to guard against something we can't even prove exists?"

Today, inquiring minds must go all the way to California for an answer of any type, to The Planetary Society that cosmologist Carl Sagan founded in Pasadena. Thomas McDonough, who directs the society's Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project, says there is no plan "anywhere in the world to deal with invasion by aliens." Why? Because aliens won't just drop in.

They'll call first.

"It's so much easier to send information than schlep around the galaxy in a ship that uses more energy than our entire civilization," says McDonough. With that in mind, there are scientists all around the country who spend their days scanning **space** for **alien** radio signals. And when The Call finally comes, they have a nine-step protocol for answering it.

It's the "Declaration of Principles Concerning Activities Following the Detection of Extraterrestrial Intelligence," and it's three pages long.

Here's the condensed version:

Confirm, confirm, confirm. Don't announce an **alien** contact until you're sure it's not a stray satellite feed from Home Shopping Network.

Call the United Nations, which has an Office for Outer **Space** Affairs based in Vienna, Austria.

Let's hope that office gets back to the aliens more efficiently than they got back to USA TODAY - it took two phone messages, two faxes and three e-mails to get this response, from a Dr. Hans Haubold:

"The United Nations Office of Outer **Space** Affairs (UN OOSA) is not involved in any effort to address the topics of Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI), UFOs or **alien** invasions. None of the 185 member states of the United Nations have addressed the above topics within the deliberations of the United Nations General Assembly."

(That's U.N.-speak for: No plan.)

Don't call back. Any **alien** contact, the protocol instructs, is a matter for "international consultations." The idea here is to make sure an excitable scientist doesn't run off and make a bad first impression.

All in all, a pretty reasonable set of instructions.

But what if the aliens decide not to call? What if they just show up, itching for a fight, like some belligerent drunk crashing a party?

No plan.

Scientist John Pike really doesn't think an "Independence Day"-style invasion is in the stars: "The odds are pretty slim of somebody building a starship simply for the purpose of coming here and blowing up the White House. I think the **space** people have better things to do."

But if aliens did choose to invade, "There's just no way of meaningfully anticipating what we'd be faced with," says Pike, director of **space** policy at the Federation of American Scientists. "Are we dealing with deathstars or battlestars? Do they have cloaking devices? Do they want to eat us? Are they pod people? The number of scenarios you'd have to plan for is close to infinite."

As a practical matter, he adds, the U.S. military could retarget its missiles toward incoming spacecraft, but that probably wouldn't work, leaving the only invasion response a global cry of "uncle."

"Apart from pre-emptive surrender, there probably wouldn't be too much you could do."

At the White House, Press Secretary Mike McCurry takes a similarly fatalistic view.

When the aliens attack, he says, "I just hope it's one of those days when **Whitewater or the FBI files have dominated the news.**"

Of course, says The Planetary Society's McDonough, if Earth did get **alien** visitors, they might just be answering our invitation. Four unmanned crafts, two Voyagers and two Pioneers, have passed out of our solar system and headed into **space**.

The Pioneers carry what McDonough calls an "interstellar postcard" including astronomical information - essentially a roadmap to our house. And the Voyagers carry even more inviting data, including photographs of Earth life and Jerry Lee Lewis recordings.

While the scientist in McDonough finds the **alien** invasion scenarios from the movies highly implausible, the sci-fi fan in him finds them harmless - even healthy.

"I think the average person hasn't grasped the lesson of Copernicus, that we're not the center of the universe, and these science fiction movies make us think about that," he says. "Even the silliest of them does something good in letting us think there's something up there."

Indeed.

Under Project Blue Book, the Air Force investigated more than 12,000 sightings of unidentified flying objects between 1947 and 1969. Of those, the Air Force was unable to identify or explain 701, which remain listed as "unidentified."

As a matter of public record, the military's involvement with reports of **alien** craft ended when Project Blue Book was closed. A final report promised that "no UFO reported, investigated and evaluated by the Air Force was ever an indication of threat to our national security."

At least that's what they want everyone to believe.

"Independence Day" suggests the military has a secret New Mexico facility where it's hiding hard evidence that there are aliens out there.

And the military continues to deny.

"How can we develop a plan to guard against them ... (when) we don't have any aliens to experiment on?" asks the Air Force's McLaurin. "We've got some weird people here, but I don't think you'd call them aliens."

Those Pentagon folks must not watch enough movies.

From "War of the Worlds" and "Earth vs. the Flying Saucers" to "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" and "Lifeforce," the movies offer tips galore for dealing with other-worldly attacks.

In "Earth vs. the Flying Saucers" (1956), the bad guys level Washington; in the end, we get them with a nifty sound gun. In "War of the Worlds," the extraterrestrials fall prey to some Earthly virus.

On the other hand, given the Pentagon's tell-it-to-the-cops attitude, maybe we should be sending sci-fi videos to our local police.

But they don't seem to have a plan, either.

"They (the Pentagon) told you to call us?" asks Officer Kenny Bryson, a spokesman for the Washington (D.C.) Metropolitan Police Department. "Aw, c'mon. You've got to be kidding.

"What are we supposed to do, write them a ticket?"

Could be our only hope.

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