

ARTICLE BY DENNIS STACY AND PATRICK HUYGHE

This is the fifth piece in a six-part series on government secrecy and UFOs through the decades. Here we look at the 1980s.

From their vantage point 22,300 miles above the earth's surface, a fleet of supersecret military satellites monitors our planet for missile launches and nuclear detonations. On a clear day, these satellites can see forever, so it's no surprise when they also pick up erupting volcanos, oil-well fires, incoming meteors, sunlight reflections off the ocean, and a host of other heat sources, including those that still remain unexplained.

Since 1985, all this data has been beamed down in near real-time to the U.S. Space Command's Missile Warning Center, operating from within Cheyenne Mountain, near Colorado Springs. The purpose: coordinating satellite-based early warning systems for the army, navy, air force, and marines. Whether harmless or threatening, the information has always been a guarded national secret. But suddenly, in 1993, with the Cold War over, the Defense Department agreed to declassify

some satellite information not related to intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches and nuclear events. Since then, scientists ranging from astronomers to geophysicists have rushed to get their hands on this motherlode of data.

Among researchers hoping to glean some truth from the declassified data are UFOlogists, long frustrated by the critics' classic retort: "If UFOs are real, why haven't they been detected by our satellites?" Well, some UFO researchers are now saying, they have been. With access to the most sophisticated space data ever generated, say some UFO researchers, they may finally find the Holy Grail of their profession: bona fide, irrefutable, nuts-and-bolts proof of UFOs.

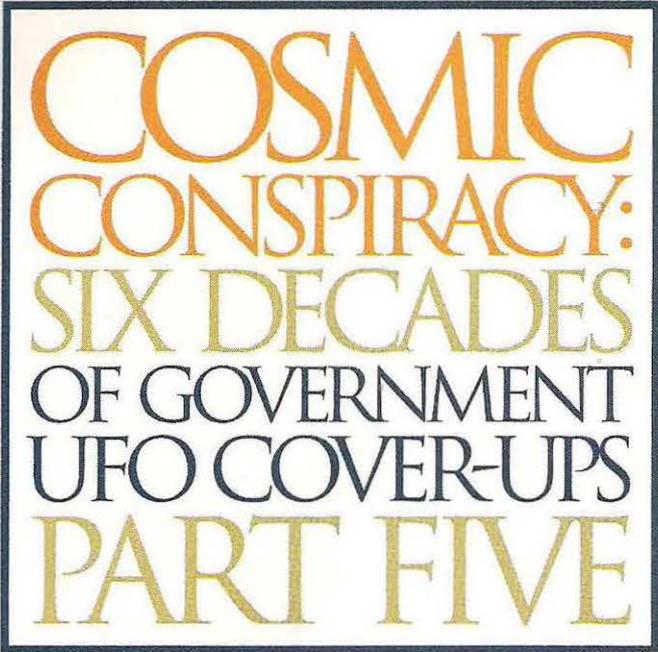
As this series of articles explains, UFO researchers have been searching for such evidence in government vaults for years. In the Fifties and Sixties, some UFOlogists claimed, the military kept alien corpses and a ship under wraps. The search for proof was fueled throughout the Seventies by the Freedom of Information Act, which yielded thousands of pages of government documents, but no hard, technical, incontrovertible evidence of UFOs. Finally, in the 1980s, a supposedly explosive memo revealed the existence of a top-secret group, dubbed MJ12, made up of high-level govern-

ment officials devoted to the secret reality of UFOs. Only problem is, according to most UFO experts, the memo was a hoax. Of course, data from crude detection systems like gun cameras and radar were available. But they merely confirmed the obvious: that military and government personnel, like many other sectors of the population, saw and reported mysterious lights in the sky.

If they could ever prove their theories, UFOlogists knew, they would have to tap the

most sophisticated information-gathering technology available: Department of Defense spy satellites, like the Defense Support Program (DSP) satellites, in geosynchronous orbit above the earth. In fact, rumor had it, heat, light, and infrared sensors at the heart of the satellites were routinely picking up moving targets clearly not missiles and tagged "Valid IR Source." Some of these targets were given the mysterious code name of "Fast Walker."

Unfortunately for UFOlogists, few secrets in this country's vast military arsenal have been so closely guarded as the operational parameters of DSP satellites. Even their exact number is classified. "That shouldn't surprise anyone," explains Captain John



COSMIC CONSPIRACY: SIX DECADES OF GOVERNMENT UFO COVER-UPS PART FIVE

ILLUSTRATION BY BRUCE JENSEN

Kennedy, public affairs officer with the USAF Space Command Center at Peterson Air Force Base. "It's an early ICBM launch detection system, and we have to protect our own technology for obvious reasons. If everyone knew what the system's capabilities were, they would try to take steps to get around it." But in recent years, thanks to a loosening of the reigns, a few tantalizing tidbits of information have managed to seep under the satellite secrecy dam, allowing UFOlogists a small glimpse of some surprising near-space events.

The first issue for UFOlogists to examine, explains Ron Regehr of Aerojet General in California, the company that builds the DSP sensor systems, is whether the satellites could detect UFOs even if we wanted them to. According to Regehr, who has worked on the satellite sensors for the last 25 years and even wrote its operational software specifications, the answer to that question was revealed in 1990, during Operation Desert Storm. "As we now know," says Regehr, "the satellites picked up every one of the 70 Iraqi Scud launches, and the Scud is a very low-intensity infrared source compared to the average ICBM."

Pursuing the matter further, Regehr turned to an article published in *MIJ Quarterly*, "Now You See It, Now You Don't," which detailed a September, 1976 UFO encounter near Teheran. The incident involved two brilliantly glowing UFOs first seen by ground observers. One object, or light source, an estimated 30 feet in diameter, reportedly went from ground level to an altitude of 40,000 feet, and was visible at a distance of 70 miles. An Imperial Iranian Air Force F-4 jet fighter was sent aloft and managed to aim a Sidewinder AIM-19 air-to-air missile at the target before its electronic systems failed.

"Apart from the visible light factor, there's the indication that the UFO gave off enough infrared energy for the Sidewinder's IR sensor to lock on to it," says Regehr. "You can do a few simple calculations," he adds, "and conclude that the DSP satellites of the day should easily have been able to see the same thing. Of course, I can't say they did, or if they did, whether or not it was recorded in the database."

Part of the problem, according to Regehr, is the sheer mountain of data that the DSP satellites generate. On average, an infrared portrait of the earth's surface and surrounding space

is downloaded every ten seconds. All of the data is then stored on large 14-inch reels of magnetic tape, "the kind," says Regehr, "that you always see spinning around in science-fiction movies, and which fill up in about 15 minutes." The tapes are eventually erased and reused.

Technicians visually monitor the datastream on a near real-time basis, but only follow up a narrow range of events—those that match up with what the air force calls "templates." Based on known rocket fuel burn times and color spectra, the templates are used to identify ballistic missile launches and nuclear explosions. But the system also picks up other infrared events ranging from mid-air collisions of planes to oil-well fires and volcanoes.

"I would say that rarely a week goes by that we don't get some kind of infrared source that is valid, or real, but unknown," admits Edward Tagliaferri, a physicist and consultant to the Aerospace Corporation in El Segundo, Cali-

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fornia, a nonprofit air force satellite-engineering contractor. "But once we determine it isn't a threat, that's basically the end of our job. We aren't paid to look at each and every one."

Tagliaferri and a handful of colleagues are among the few civilian space scientists who have thus far been allowed access to the Department of Defense database. Their research, based on spy satellite data declassified in the fall of 1993, is part of a chapter in *Hazards Due to Comets and Asteroids*, from the University of Arizona Press. "I think the air force finally agreed that the data had scientific, as well as political and global security value," says Tagliaferri.

What Tagliaferri and his collaborators were able to confirm was that between 1975 and 1992, DOD satellites detected 136 upper-atmosphere explosions, a few equivalent in energy to the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Unlike the three- to ten-minute burn periods of an ICBM, these previously unacknowl-

edged "flash events" typically take place in a matter of seconds. They are attributable to meteorites and small asteroids. "Most of what we see are objects that are probably 10 to 50 meters in diameter, about the size of a house, and packing 300 times the kinetic energy of dynamite," Tagliaferri says.

The ramifications, however, is that nervous governments might mistake these flash events for nuclear bombs aimed in their direction and trigger a like response. One of the brightest unknown flash events occurred over Indonesia on April 15, 1988, shortly before noon, exploding with the approximate firepower of 5,000 tons of high explosives. A slightly less powerful detonation shook an uninhabited expanse of the Pacific Ocean on October 1, 1990, in the midst of Operation Desert Shield.

"But what if the latter event had exploded a little lower in the atmosphere, and over, say, Baghdad?" Tagliaferri warns. "The consequences could well have been disastrous. Ground observers would have seen a fireball the brightness of the sun and heard a shock wave rattle windows. Given the mindset of the Iraqis, Israelis, and the other combatants in the area at the time, any of them might have concluded that they were under nuclear attack and responded accordingly."

The argument that some UFOs might be capable of triggering a similar false alarm has been made many times in the past by, among others, the Soviets. An article titled "UFOs and Security," which appeared in the June, 1989 issue of *Soviet Military Review*, states: "We believe that lack of information on the characteristics and influence of UFOs increases the threat of incorrect identification. Then, mass transit of UFOs along trajectories close to those of combat missiles could be regarded by computers as an attack."

But when asked if some unknowns detected by satellite sensors might represent real UFOs rather than incoming meteorites, Tagliaferri chuckles. "Personally, I don't think so," he says. "But who knows? How can you tell? I'm a scientist, a physicist, and to my mind the evidence of UFOs is just not convincing. On the other hand, I've been wrong before."

UFOlogists, meanwhile, think that proof might be lurking in the stacks of printouts from the DSP system computers. But the only material of this sort

COSMIC

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50

likely to see the light of day will probably have to come from inside leaks. And that may have already happened. One UFO researcher, using sources he won't reveal, has turned up evidence of what he believes might be a UFO tracked by satellite. Last year, Joe Stefula, formerly a special agent with the army's Criminal Investigation Command, made public on several electronic bulletin boards what purports to be a diagram of an infrared event detected by a DSP satellite on May 5, 1984. "I haven't been able to determine that the document's absolutely authentic," says Stefula, "but I have been able to confirm that the DSP printout for that date shows an event at the same time with the same characteristics."

According to Stefula's alleged source, now said to be retired from the military, the official code name for unidentified objects exhibiting ballistic missile characteristics is Fast Walker. "But what makes this particular Fast Walker so peculiar," says Stefula, "is that it comes in from outer space on a curved trajectory, passes within three kilometers of the satellite platform, and then disappears back into space. Whatever it is, it was tracked for nine minutes. That doesn't sound like a meteorite to me."

Regehr agrees: "It was there too long. It was going too slow. It didn't have enough speed for escape velocity." But escape it did.

The May, 1984 event allegedly generated a 300-page internal report, only portions of which are classified, though none of it has yet been released. "I don't think they would do a 300-page report on everything they detect," says Stefula, whose efforts to obtain the report have so far been unsuccessful, "so there must have been something significant about this that led them to look into it. My source told me that they basically looked at every possibility and couldn't explain it by natural or man-made means."

Nor was this apparently an isolated event. According to the unnamed source, such Fast Walkers are detected, on the average, "two to three times a month."

Even longtime arch-UFO skeptic Philip J. Klass, contributing avionics editor to *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, admits that the military's DSP satellites could detect physical flying saucers from outer space—but with one very large proviso: "If you assume," says Klass, "that a UFO travel-

ing at, say, 80,000 feet leaves a long, strong plume like a space shuttle launch. But we know that isn't the way UFOs are usually reported."

Part of the problem, according to Klass, who has written a book on military spy satellites titled *Secret Sentries in Space*, is that the DSP system has performed better than spec. "It's too good, or too sensitive, if you prefer," he says. "In fact, it was so good that it was sent back to research and development for fine tuning, in order to eliminate as many false alarms as possible. Obviously, we didn't want a fuel storage tank fire next to a Soviet missile silo to set off a launch alarm," he explains. "Nor did we want the system to track the dozens or hundreds of Russian jet fighters in the air every day."

Klass's best guess is that the mysterious May, 1984 Fast Walker event uncovered by Stefula probably represents nothing more than a classified mission flown by our own SR-71 high-altitude Blackbird spyplane. "It's admittedly too long a duration to be a meteor fireball," he concedes, "but the Blackbird typically flies at an altitude of 80,000 to 100,000 feet, which makes its afterburner trail easily visible to the DSP system."

In the same context, says Klass, Fast Walker might be a code name for the recently retired SR-71 itself, or, conceivably, its Soviet counterpart, assuming the Soviets had one at the time. Either way, Klass concludes, "It's no surprise that the air force would want to keep much of this information secret."

Apparently, keep most of it secret they will. Despite the success Tagliaferri and a few others had in getting past the military censors, don't anticipate a flood of similar studies, especially one in search of UFO reports. "I don't see the air force declassifying a whole lot more of the DSP data to other scientists, not without an incredible amount of cleanup," says Captain Kennedy. "And it's certainly not accessible to requests through the Freedom of Information Act."

Even if some unknowns turn out to be UFOs, the Air Force Space Command isn't going to hand UFOlogists—or anyone else—that information on a silver platter. Meanwhile, the dividing line between what might constitute extraterrestrial technology and our own twentieth century equivalent grows increasingly narrow and blurred with every new device sent into space. Somewhere out there, no doubt, is a sensor system that already knows whether we are being visited by UFOs or not, but the owners of those systems aren't talking. □

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