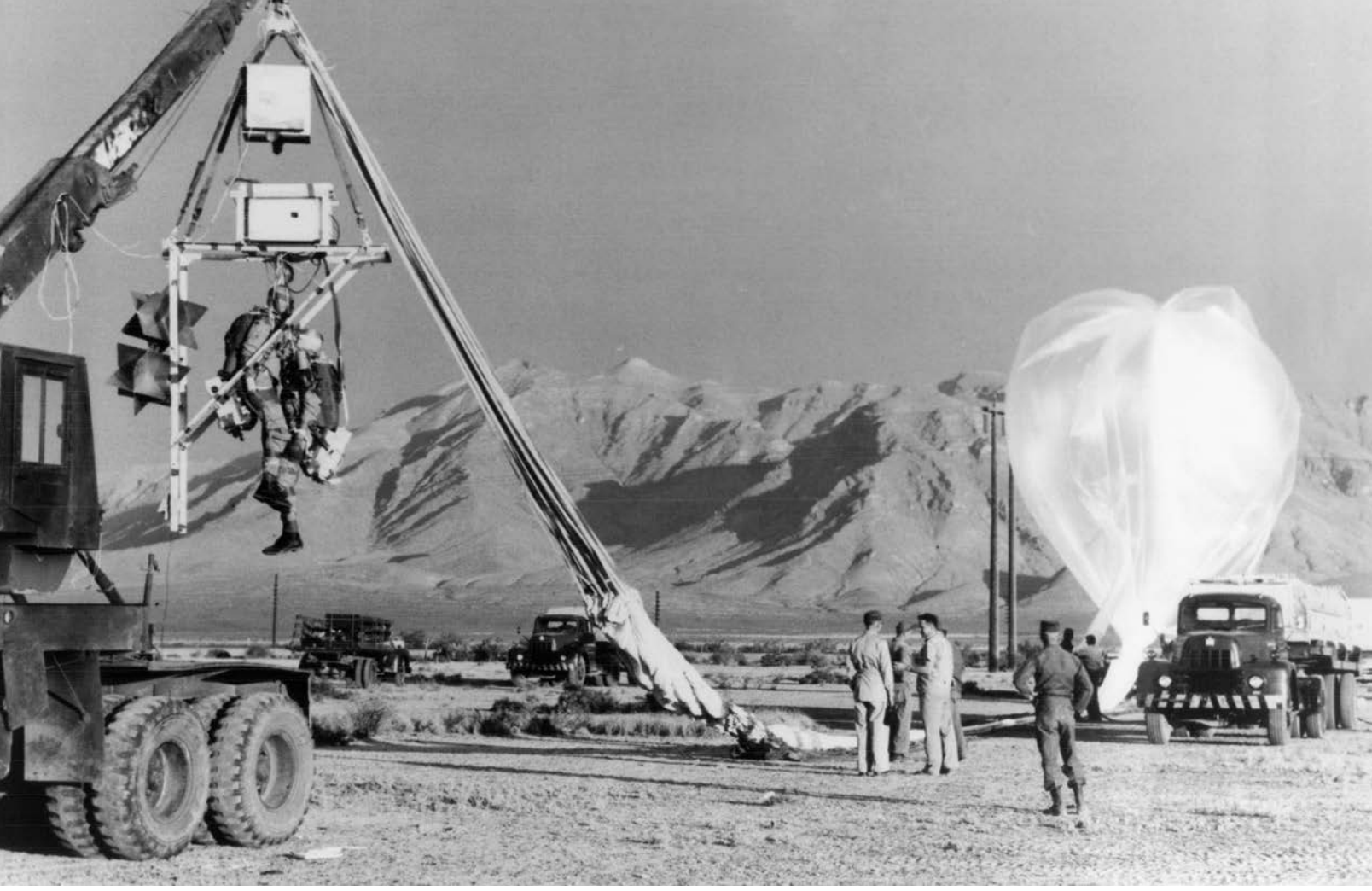

Project High Dive anthropomorphic dummy launch, White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico, June 11, 1953 (DOD/Air Force Declassification Office)

Cutting the Chaff

Overlooked Lessons of Military UAP Sightings for Joint Force and Interagency Coordination

By Luke M. Herrington

Since at least the end of World War II, the public has been fascinated by the appearance of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and other unidentified aerial phenomena (UAPs). Periodically, the national security community has become similarly intrigued. One early incident that drew the scrutiny of both the public and the military involved the death of a pilot and the destruction of his plane. On January 7, 1948, public reports of a UFO traveling southwest through Ohio and Kentucky were verified by the control towers at a dozen Midwestern airfields, including the tower at Godman Army Airfield at Fort Knox. When no one in the tower could identify the object, the base commander at Godman directed a trio of Kentucky Air National Guard F-51s to investigate. Captain Thomas Mantell took the lead. Although neither of his wingmen could see anything in the air that fateful afternoon, Mantell believed he could see

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an object both ahead of and above his plane. Disregarding the F-51's specified parameters, as well as his own physical limitations, Mantell ascended to a dangerous altitude of 20,000 feet while in pursuit. Lacking the requisite oxygen for such a trip, Mantell lost consciousness and crashed near Franklin, Kentucky. While it was initially reported that Mantell could have been "chasing" Venus, later investigations revealed that he likely died chasing a Navy Skyhook research balloon.[1]

What lessons can the joint force and its interagency partners learn from such episodes? For one, the Mantell incident and other military UAP sightings make it clear that misidentification remains a common problem in complex operating environments. Like the broader and often analogous histories of military accidents, including the problems of both friendly fire and collateral damage, they demonstrate how distinguishing one's joint force and interagency partners (or their assets) from an enemy force, from civilians and other noncombatants, or even from environmental phenomena can be a challenge in the best of circumstances.

For another, misidentification of friendly (or nonhostile) airborne assets could lead to expensive or even fatal accidents in the field, and the fog of war would exacerbate such concerns. Take the April 14, 1994, Army Black Hawk shootdown incident that occurred in northern Iraq as an example. Two Black Hawk helicopters were destroyed while carrying personnel from multiple countries associated with the Operation *Restore Comfort* peacekeeping mission after they were misidentified as a pair of Soviet-manufactured Iraqi Mi-24 Hinds. Neither the two Air Force F-15 pilots responsible for their destruction nor the team aboard the E-3B airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft responsible for monitoring air traffic was able to properly identify the Black Hawks, at least in part because of a failure in the identification friend or foe (IFF) computer system on the helicopters. However, the Air Force pilots in the F-15s also failed to recognize the Black Hawks as U.S. aircraft during a visual sweep despite their numerous aesthetic differences from the Hind. Consequently, all 26 people onboard the Black Hawks were killed when the AWACS and F-15s misidentified their transport vehicles as enemy aircraft.[2]

Taken together, these two lessons point to a third directly related to the complicated logistics of maneuvering in complex environments where the military and its partners compete for limited time and space. Namely, these types of environments require consistent collaboration and clear communication among each branch of the Armed Forces and their interagency or international partners. If, for instance, the AWACS crew were notified by the Army about the dignitaries in their area of operations, perhaps the Black Hawk shootdown incident could have been avoided. Similarly, the Navy may have been able to help prevent Captain Mantell's untimely death if military control towers throughout the Midwest were directed to disregard an unknown object moving through the region's airspace by a central clearinghouse with knowledge of the classified mission.

This important lesson has gone largely overlooked in recent conversations about military UAP sightings. Instead, the national security community has responded to military UAP sightings by accepting their uncritical *securitization*. International relations scholars define this concept as the "process whereby issues are presented as security threats and, if relevant audiences accept these representations, emergency measures are enabled to deal with them."[3] Responding to the recent public and political frenzy over UFOs as if they were hostile incursions into American airspace elevates such objects to the public security agenda alongside a number of more important issues like terrorism, climate change, and the coronavirus pandemic.[4]

Accordingly, the Navy implemented new UAP reporting procedures in 2019, and despite having ruled out any potential national security threat on multiple occasions in the past, the Air Force did likewise the following year. In 2021, the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) issued a congressionally mandated report on the subject, and the Department of Defense (DOD) set up another program—the government's tenth, as far as the public is aware—to study the phenomena in 2022. Meanwhile, the Congressional Select Committee on Intelligence held its first public hearing on the subject since 1966.[5] One might expect such a response from the North American Aerospace Defense Command or the Federal Aviation Administration. Unsurprisingly, clutter in the skies represents a hazard for military and commercial air traffic alike. The problem, though, is that as a Federal policy response to UAP sightings, securitization is fraught with risk.

First, rhetorically elevating UAPs to the public national security agenda distracts from the importance of communication and coordination in joint force or interagency operating environments. As the Mantell incident illustrates, failure to recognize this can lead to misidentification and, with that, expensive or fatal accidents in the field. Second, UFO securitization can waste the military's time and the taxpayer's money by disrupting normal military operations. For example, disrupting a pilot's mission to chase UAPs incurs real costs for the Services. Third, securitizing UAPs could lead to a further deterioration in Sino- or Russo-American relations or, in a worst-case scenario, even a new arms race. Fourth, securitizing UAPs undermines the military's goal of creating a critically thinking force. In sum, national security could suffer if lessons learned from military UAP sightings are overlooked in favor of their securitization.

I turn to the so-called USS *Nimitz* incident, a military UAP sighting disclosed to the public in 2017, both to argue that there are real lessons to learn from this incident about maneuvering in a joint force operating environment and to show why securitization represents an inappropriate response to these sightings. Admittedly, proponents of securitization also point to such things as Air Force sightings in Kosovo, Army sightings over Afghanistan, and sightings near nuclear weapons caches throughout the

United States. Reflecting critically on the open-source details that emerge from any of these episodes would highlight similar lessons. However, the 2004 *Nimitz* incident represents the central pillar in the discourse on UAP securitization.[6] When paired with the fact that the *Nimitz* incident may be the most well-documented military UAP sighting previously disclosed to the public, this makes the case more important than any others. Thus, scrutinizing this days-long encounter that allegedly brought a naval battlegroup—the 11th Carrier Strike Group—into contact with innumerable UFOs highlights the three lessons outlined above most clearly.

In the next section, I analyze the *Nimitz* incident and offer some potential explanations for the UAPs that Sailors from the *Nimitz* battlegroup witnessed in 2004. Following that, I expand my argument that the complicated logistics of maneuvering in a joint force or interagency context require consistent collaboration and clear communication to avoid unnecessary risks that could lead to costly or life-ending accidents. To accomplish this, I present a strategic interpretation of key open-source details associated with the *Nimitz* incident and compare the case to the 1988 USS *Vincennes* incident. Finally, recognizing that logistics represent only one critical component in a strategic interpretation of military UAP sightings, I elaborate on the implications of my argument for personnel, foreign policy, and pedagogy in the conclusion.

A Brief Analysis of the *Nimitz* Incident

The *Nimitz* incident occurred over the course of several days in the Southern California Offshore Range (SCORE) Complex in November 2004. On November 10, then–Senior Chief Petty Officer Kevin Day, an air intercept controller aboard the USS *Princeton*, spotted several mystery objects on radar. In different interviews, Day claims to have seen anywhere between "ten" and "hundreds" of these radar-indicated objects over the next few days.[7] Then, on November 14, the incident reached its climax when Day and his commanding officer dispatched a pair of F/A-18 Super Hornets from the *Nimitz* to investigate the objects. Commander David Fravor, the commanding officer of the Black Aces squadron, and his wingman, Lieutenant Commander Alex Dietrich, were diverted from a training mission to investigate the anomalous radar returns. This led to the so-called Tic Tac intercept, where the pilots ostensibly encountered a white, ovoid, 40-foot-long object with no wings or visible propulsion flying over the Pacific.[8] Later that day, footage of the Tic Tac was recorded by a third pilot.[9]

The media's attempts to sensationalize the affair notwithstanding, aspects of the *Nimitz* incident can be easily explained or debunked. For example, footage of the Tic Tac likely features a commercial plane.[10] Another possibility is that the pilots misremember details associated with a joint force or interagency research program. Several organizations use SCORE for training and testing. In addition to serving as one of the Navy's fleet testing areas, the range is home to a Department of Energy Advanced Research Projects Agency mine testing area, parachute drop zones, several radar and sonar monitoring sites, and multiple Marine Corps amphibious assault training areas.[11] Notably, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) used the SCORE complex to test a hypersonic drone, the X-43, on November 16, 2004.[12]

As for the mystery radar returns, the meteorologist onboard the *Princeton* dismissed the objects as ice crystal reflections.[13] Even the DNI's 2021 UAP report acknowledges this as a real possibility.[14] However, a far more likely, though still mundane, possibility is that the *Princeton* was tracking the northern wave of the Taurid meteor shower. The Taurids begin in September and last through December each year, but in 2004, the northern wave of the Taurids peaked *during* the *Nimitz* incident on November 12.[15] Additionally, not only could meteors be detected by radar, but they would also account for the number of objects allegedly detected, their reported altitudes, their reported velocities, and their perceived deceleration.[16] The Taurids also have a history of producing fireballs the world over, including bolides capable of lighting up the daytime sky.[17] Ultimately, it does not matter if Day saw the Taurids, ice, or something else. The outcome was the same: overconfidence in, or misinterpretation of, the available information led to misidentification.

A Strategic Interpretation of the *Nimitz* Incident

The military's Aegis SPY-1 radar system can reportedly track an object as small as a golf ball, and the Aegis computer system can be programmed to ignore objects matching certain profiles.[18] Thus, while the *Princeton*'s computers could easily detect small meteors, they should have filtered out astronomical phenomena such as the Taurids. However, despite its sophistication, neither the radar system nor its operators can be described as infallible. Aegis is something akin to Frankenstein's monster, built as it is from many different constituent systems, including the SPY-1 radar itself, weapons control systems, navigation equipment, and various other integrated components. This introduces multiple potential failure points in the system's hardware and software. As a result, Aegis has a well-documented history—however rare—of misidentifying or failing to identify aircraft operating in the vicinity of American warships. Assuming Aegis operated flawlessly, the system's human operators would still represent its most common points of failure.[19]

Consider the July 3, 1988, tragedy involving the USS *Vincennes*. While pursuing and firing on multiple Iranian gunboats in the Strait of Hormuz, the crew of the *Vincennes* detected a civilian airliner, Iran Air Flight 655, shortly after it took off from the airport in Bandar Abbas. Like the IFF system failure that resulted in the Black Hawk shootdown incident 6 years later, the plane's IFF computer was not working properly. Meanwhile, the ship's brand-new Aegis SPY-1 radar system indicated that the

Air Force U-2 pilot looks down at suspected Chinese surveillance balloon, February 3, 2023, as it hovers over Central Continental United States (Department of Defense)

plane was ascending in a commercial air traffic lane. Nevertheless, the crew of the *Vincennes* mistook the plane for a diving Iranian F-14 Tomcat and shot it down, killing all 290 people onboard. Human communications failures, misinterpretation of the Aegis data, and the IFF failure combined with the crew's resulting unease to cause the disaster.[20]

Returning to the *Princeton*, the ship's November 2004 mission likely served as a shakedown cruise for the very same—albeit updated—equipment. Like the *Vincennes*, the Aegis systems that Day was working with had only recently been installed.[21] It is probable that the radar system's programming (or the operators' training) was not fully prepared for the Taurids. Even if it was working properly, Day clearly ignored the explanation proffered by his meteorologist when he dispatched the Black Aces to investigate the anomalous radar returns. Fortunately, the stakes in the Pacific were nowhere near so consequential as they were for the *Vincennes*. Nevertheless, this is troubling because some details associated with the *Nimitz* incident may indicate that Fravor narrowly avoided an accidental collision with the UAP he and Dietrich were dispatched to assess.

Consider Dietrich's public comments: she suggests that the water below the Tic Tac–shaped UFO was churning violently, as if a submarine had just submerged.[22] This is an important detail; it implies that the two pilots entered a weapons test site to investigate the *Princeton*'s UAPs. Indeed, according to the government's unclassified executive summary from a 2009 report documenting the *Nimitz* incident, the USS *Louisville*, the *Los Angeles*–class submarine attached to the *Nimitz* battlegroup, was conducting weapons tests in the area. While the executive summary also states that no pilots would be vectored into a live-fire test site coordinated with the battlegroup, it acknowledges—just one sentence earlier—that Fravor and Dietrich were in fact directed into the area of the

Screengrab of "Gimbal," one of three U.S. military videos of unidentified aerial phenomenon, declassified and approved for public release, taken aboard Navy fighter jet from nuclear aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, near Florida coast, January 21, 2015 (U.S. Navy)

Louisville's weapon test.[23] Add to this the facts that the Tic Tac was reportedly a low-visibility aircraft capable of erratic, unpredictable high-G maneuvers, including aggressively gaining altitude, as well as the fact that it flew directly at Fravor's plane before disappearing, and the suggestion that Fravor or Dietrich (like Mantell before them) placed their lives in danger chasing the *Princeton*'s UAPs becomes quite plausible.[24]

Admittedly, this interpretation relies on the assumption that the Tic Tac was part of the *Louisville*'s weapons test. Yet even if that assumption is incorrect and the pilots instead encountered an interagency program, such as NASA's unmanned X-43, or an asset belonging to one of the Navy's other partners, the evidence points to the same important lessons illuminated by the Mantell, *Vincennes*, and Black Hawk shootdown incidents. That is, misidentification is a common problem that could lead to

expensive or fatal accidents, like the loss of an aircraft or a pilot, and consistent and clear communication is required to prevent such accidents while operating jointly in a complex environment.

Unfortunately, more recent UAP episodes suggest that the circumstances associated with the *Nimitz* incident have not been adequately addressed. According to the DNI's 2021 UAP report, 11 percent of all military UAP sightings recorded between 2004 and 2021 involved a near miss.[25] One 2014 case involved an F-18 Super Hornet squadron and a near miss with a cluster of unidentified balloon- or drone-like objects over the Atlantic.[26] This clearly suggests that the need for better coordination in joint force and interagency operating areas like the SCORE complex still requires attention to improve safety. The new Navy and Air Force reporting system may be a useful way to catalogue the scale of this problem, but this is only a reactive measure. Perhaps the joint force should establish a test site coordinating authority responsible for monitoring air traffic and warning pilots away from classified operations. By serving as a clearinghouse for communications between those parties responsible for the test (for example, NASA) and the rest of the military and its partners (for example, the *Princeton* crew or the Black Aces), this coordinating authority could help minimize the risk associated with these tests and prevent future accidents.

Implications

Although the *Nimitz* incident lacks the cachet of Roswell or Area 51, it has evolved into one of the most salient UFO myths currently ascendent in the American zeitgeist. Nevertheless, after analyzing the *Nimitz* incident and some of its potential causes, a more logical explanation of the event points to a complex confluence of unrelated, comprehensible, known causal factors, including a recently upgraded Aegis radar system and an inability to filter out naturally occurring phenomena like ice or meteors. Thus, what has been mythologized as an encounter with hundreds of UFOs could hardly be described as out of the ordinary.

Nevertheless, several former national security professionals and current and former Members of Congress have spent the last 5 years promoting the securitization of the UFO. They stoke the public's fascination with military UAP sightings, such as those featured in the *Nimitz* or Mantell cases.[27] Their attempts to portray the *Nimitz* incident and other events like it as major national security threats notwithstanding, scholars of international relations, foreign policy practitioners, military thinkers, and other national security professionals should remain skeptical of UAP securitization discourse for five reasons.

First, securitizing the UAP implies that national security thinkers have overlooked the strategic and operational lessons that can be gleaned from the *Nimitz* and Mantell incidents and similar episodes. Chief among these is the fact that operating in multilateral contexts requires consistent and clear communication as well as the kind of constant collaboration that could be provided by a central clearinghouse. The *Nimitz*, *Vincennes*, and Black Hawk shootdown incidents also demonstrate that overconfidence in technology is no substitute for intentional, well-planned, and human-driven coordination.

Second, UAP securitization can cost the taxpayer in tangible and intangible ways, both in terms of hardware and human life. For instance, it costs an average of $11,556 per hour just to keep one F-18 in the air, so the cost of canceling a training mission to have multiple fighter jets hunt UAPs represents significant waste.[28] In a worst-case scenario, the *Nimitz* incident could have resulted in the additional loss of four officers and two jets that, as of 2019, cost more than $51 million each to manufacture, and that is to say nothing of the resources it would have required for the carrier strike group to have conducted search and rescue operations.[29]

Counterfactuals aside, a more pressing concern would be the allocation of taxpayer money to superfluous UAP research programs. By opening the door to this kind of spending, unscrupulous defense contractors could seize the opportunity to pilfer the national security budget. One American defense contractor that capitalized on a similar funding opportunity to study UFOs and wormholes used their $22 million contract to produce a 2009 report full of amateurish drawings, including one depicting Albert Einstein using a wormhole to meet the dinosaurs.[30] Ten years later, the Army agreed to a $750,000 research partnership with the firm leading the push for UFO securitization.[31] It remains unclear how the United States could benefit from this kind of spending on UAP-related research. Conversely, it may serve to materially undermine the American military much in the way the Nazi preoccupation with the occult served to undermine the German military-industrial complex at the end of World War II.[32]

Third, since securitizing the UAP represents a further infiltration of pseudoscience and conspiracy theory into the halls of American government, it poses personnel problems related to the use and potential abuse of security clearances. For example, many former national security officials who serve as proponents of UAP securitization discourse are contractors who invoke their still-active security clearances and former positions both to make themselves seem like trustworthy UAP subject matter experts and to promote their personal beliefs and political agendas. They also hide behind their clearances to avoid scrutiny and uncomfortable questions.[33] Some may see this as similar to the problem of commercialization affecting U.S. special operations forces, but where UAPs are concerned, this strategy results in a misinformed public. Perhaps the Pentagon should determine if any of these individuals are violating their clearances by misleading the public about the threat UAPs represent. Anyone found abusing their privileged knowledge to promote the politicization of UAPs for personal gain should have still-active clearances revoked.

Fourth, the securitization of the UFO could lead to a range of unintended policy consequences, potentially

Main gate of Area 51, Air Force Nellis Testing Range, in Lincoln County, Nevada, September 22, 2019 (Courtesy David James Henry)

including increased tensions among the United States, China, and Russia. For comparison, the mid-20th-century hunt for the Yeti illustrates how Great Power tensions can be exacerbated by the militarization of folklore. At the height of the Cold War, American, British, Chinese, and Russian monster hunters, mountain climbers, and other explorers were often accused of espionage while adventuring in the Himalayas.[34] It is thus concerning that some efforts to securitize the UFO portray UAPs in American airspace as advanced technology developed by such countries as China or Russia without any evidence.[35] Indeed, as the February 2023 incident involving the shooting down of the Chinese spy balloon off the coast of South Carolina demonstrates,[36] China's overflight espionage appears limited to the same 1940s balloon technology pioneered by American programs such as Skyhook. The signals intelligence–gathering technology attached to these balloons represents a real security concern. Nevertheless, policymakers should remain cautious about treating mere balloons as if they represent the same kind of threat posed by, for instance, China's hypersonic drone program.

Doing so would be deeply troubling since similar exaggerated narratives were cultivated about weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in the run-up to war with Iraq.[37] It would be hyperbole to suggest that the securitization of UAPs could lead directly to war in the way WMDs facilitated conflict with Iraq. However, history demonstrates that linking Great Power rivalry to the securitization of the UAP could, in a worst-case scenario, metastasize into an arms race. Misperceptions about rival nations' technology and scientific research and development have already had similar effects on multiple occasions in the past. Dwight Eisenhower's perception of a missile gap with the Soviet Union is a prime example.[38] However, the Central Intelligence Agency's and Army's infamous 20th-century experiments with, respectively, "mind control" (Project MKUltra) and parapsychology (Stargate Project) might be more apt.[39] Regardless, even if securitization does not lead to war, there is evidence to suggest that these sorts of programs foster arms races, while arms races themselves cause conflict.[40]

Finally, UAP securitization disregards the military leader's goal of developing a critical thinking mindset equipped to understand, analyze, assess, and act decisively in any operational environment or strategic theater. An open-source review of the *Nimitz* incident suggests that

extant approaches to critical thinking in professional military education (PME) may need to adapt more quickly to accomplish this goal. UAP sightings in military contexts should be approached as real-world case studies on the need to understand one's operational environment. Studying UAPs in this way could improve many officers' dissatisfaction with extant critical thinking skills-building curricula in PME because it would deemphasize logical fallacies and argument construction.[41] Indeed, thinking critically about an event such as the *Nimitz* incident and similar events offers more than just an opportunity to craft a better argument; it presents an opportunity to learn how to think about some of the uncertainties future military leaders may encounter in complex operational environments.

To help PME students understand military UAP sightings, they should be taught to examine the contexts in which the incidents occur. For example, a UAP sighting in the SCORE area should come off as unsurprising for any critically thinking military or government professional. PME students only need to recognize the multiuse nature of a given range or operational area and that military and other governmental agencies all use them to train or test specific technologies, much of which may be appropriately classified to protect the Nation's capabilities. As with Area 51 and other test and training ranges, military, scientific, and technological testing serves as the raison d'être for the SCORE complex.[42] Knowing this, trained critical thinkers should reasonably conclude that aerial phenomena perceived as "unexplainable" in a military operating environment are highly likely to be tests conducted by the military or its interagency partners. In the case of the *Nimitz* incident, the *Princeton*'s experiences with the Taurids represent an important exception to this conclusion, but no otherworldly explanation is needed to understand the Tic Tac intercept. Instead, it was likely the product of a *Louisville* weapons test or a NASA drone test.

Overclassification and the absence of information it represents may still be problematic. For instance, placing unnecessary barriers between the public and whatever information is being concealed can contribute to the spread of UFO conspiracy theories, while increased transparency could help desecuritize the UAP. Additionally, since the public only has access to open-source information on military UAP sightings, the assumptions and deductions built into the analysis above must be reexamined when additional information about the *Nimitz* incident is declassified. If the *Nimitz* incident is to be treated as a critical thinking case study in relevant PME courses, it would be beneficial for additional details about the incident to either be declassified or reviewed at classified levels to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the case. If appropriately classified to protect U.S. interests, however, overclassification must still be avoided. Balance is needed to empower critical thinkers with the information they need to fully understand their areas of operations. Alternatively, the military could implement reforms to fight the problems of overclassification generally. This would arm the public against misinformation and conspiracy theory. More important, students could confidently use open-source information about military UAP sightings to learn that operating in multilateral contexts requires consistent and clear communication, as well as constant collaboration, to avoid the problems of misidentification that often crop up in complex environments. Students may even identify additional previously overlooked strategic and operational lessons from military UAP sightings. Either way, by learning and applying the lessons presented here, the military and its partners will be better prepared to cut through the chaff of conspiracy theory that so often grows out of such sightings. **JFQ**

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