

Rumors swirl about balloons, UFOs as officials stay mum

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In this image released by the U.S. Navy, sailors assigned to Assault Craft Unit 4 prepare material recovered off the coast of Myrtle Beach, S.C., in the Atlantic Ocean from the shooting down of a Chinese high-altitude balloon, for transport to the FBI, at Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek in Virginia Beach, Va., on Feb. 10, 2023. The federal government's lack of information about four aerial objects recently shot down over North America is helping to fuel conspiracy theories and conjecture on the internet. Credit: Ryan Seelbach/U.S. Navy via AP

Maybe they came from China. Maybe from somewhere farther away. A lot farther away.

The downing of four aerial devices by U.S. warplanes has touched off rampant misinformation about the objects, their origin and their purpose, showing how complicated world events and a lack of information can quickly create the perfect conditions for unchecked conjecture and misinformation.

The presence of mysterious objects high in the sky doesn't help.

"There will be an investigation and we will learn more, but until then this story has created a playground for people interested in speculating or stirring the pot for their own reasons," said Jim Ludes, a former national defense analyst who now leads the Pell Center for International Relations at Salve Regina University.

"In part," Ludes added, "because it feeds into so many narratives about government secrecy."

President Joe Biden and other top Washington officials have said little about the repeated shootdowns, which began with a suspected Chinese spy balloon earlier this month. Three more unidentified devices have been shot down, with the latest Sunday over Lake Huron. Pentagon officials said they posed no security threats but have not disclosed their origins or purpose.

On Monday, many social media sites in the U.S. lit up with theories that Biden had deployed the aerial devices as a way to distract Americans from other, more pressing issues. Those concerns included immigration, inflation, the war in Ukraine and Republican investigations into Hunter Biden, the president's son.

While the concentration of claims was highest on fringe sites popular with far-right Americans, the unfounded rumors and conspiracy theories popped up on bigger platforms like Twitter and Facebook, too.

One of the most popular theories suggested the White House and Pentagon are using the airborne devices to divert attention from a chemical spill earlier this month in Ohio.

That incident, caused by a train derailment, occurred several days before the most recent devices were shot down, and was covered extensively. Nonetheless, the spill remained the top subject searched on Google on Monday, showing continued public interest in the story.

China's government apparently took notice. On Tuesday Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying tweeted a link to news coverage of the Ohio chemical leak and added #OhioChernobyl, a hashtag used in many posts that suggest the incident is being covered up.

"Apparently some in the US take a wandering civilian balloon as a big threat while the explosive train derailment and toxic chemical leak not," she wrote in the tweet, which racked up tens of thousands of views within hours Tuesday.

Misleading claims about the airborne devices have also prompted violent threats, according to an analysis by the SITE Intelligence Group, a firm that tracks extremist rhetoric online. After the White House said earlier surveillance flights went undetected during Donald Trump's presidency, an article circulated on far-right sites urging the execution of any Trump administration officials who may have withheld the information.

Trump administration officials have said they knew of no such surveillance craft.

Some commenters said Biden's decision to wait until the balloon had reached the East Coast before shooting it down showed he was in league with China. Others, meanwhile, chastised Biden for shooting down foreign aircraft that they imagined could be carrying bioweapons or nuclear weapons.

Alongside the political conspiracy theories were suggestions that the aerial objects were extraterrestrial in origin. Photos of alleged UFOs were shared online and web searches for the term "UFO" soared around the world Sunday, according to information from Google Trends.

Online posts mentioning extraterrestrials increased by nearly 300% since the first balloon was identified, according to an analysis conducted for The Associated Press by Zignal Labs, a San Francisco-based media intelligence firm. Zignal's review included millions of posts on platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Reddit.

"Don't worry, just some of my friends of mine stopping by," Elon Musk, the CEO of Twitter, Tesla and SpaceX, joked in a tweet Sunday.

Humor aside, while the details of the different claims vary, they have two things in common: a lack of evidence and a strong distrust of America's elected leaders.

"Maybe Joe built the balloon & had Hunter launch it to scare we the people!" wrote one Facebook user. "How do WE know??? We don't!"

The federal government must balance the public's desire to know the details with the need for secrecy regarding national security and defense, Ludes said. That's not likely to satisfy Biden's critics, Ludes said, or prevent misleading explanations from going viral.

High-profile news stories and events often precede a spike in false and

misleading claims as people turn to the internet for explanations. Conspiracy theories about Buffalo Bills player Damar Hamlin spread quickly after his dramatic on-field collapse in January. Something similar happened last year when the Nord Stream pipelines in the North Sea were damaged.

In that instance, Russia spread conspiracy theories blaming the U.S. for the sabotage. The baseless theories were quickly amplified by far-right users in the U.S. It's not the first time America's authoritarian adversaries have seized on global events to portray the U.S. as belligerent.

China has claimed the balloon shot down Feb. 4 was engaged in meteorological research. On Monday, China's foreign ministry said 10 U.S. balloons had entered Chinese airspace without permission in the past year.

Beijing's response to this latest diplomatic row seeks to portray China as the responsible actor, while sidestepping surveillance allegations made by the U.S., according to Kenton Thibaut, a China expert at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, a Washington-based organization that tracks foreign disinformation and propaganda.

"It's about projecting an image of responsibility and rationality, of being the adult in the room," Thibaut said of China's response. "It's a clear signal to nations in the developing world that the U.S. is selfish, untrustworthy and hypocritical."

On Monday, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre did refute one viral claim to have emerged from the balloon saga.

"I know there have been questions and concerns about this, but there is no—again no indication—of aliens or extraterrestrial activity with these

recent takedowns," Jean-Pierre told reporters. "I wanted to make sure that the American people knew that, all of you knew that and it was important for us to say that from here because we've been hearing a lot about it."

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