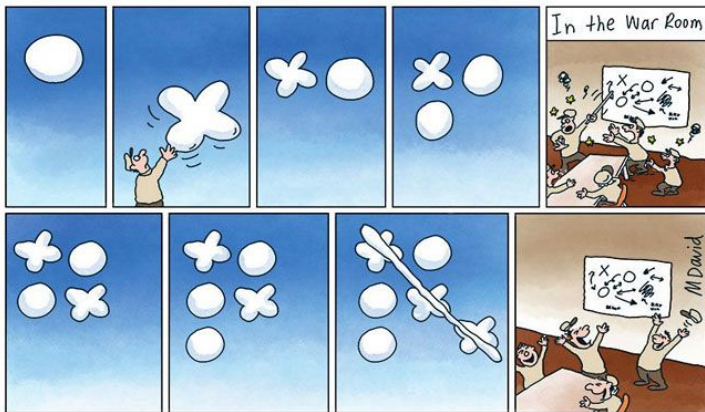


Chinese balloons cause trigger-happy hysteria in U.S.

By Norm Sanders

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US and China balloons - an escalation...



(Cartoon by Mark David / @MDavidCartoons)

The Chinese balloon saga caused strained relations with China, exposed blatant political opportunism by [MAGA](#) Republicans and ended in a farce with USAF F-22 jet fighters shooting down [party balloons](#).

It all started when the Chinese launched the 60-metre-tall [balloon](#) from Hainan in China's southeast. The balloon was massive, almost as high as the Sydney Opera House. It climbed to an altitude of 60,000 feet where it was carried by the jet stream at 160 kph past the Aleutian Islands and finally over the Western United States. Being launched so far south, the balloon was probably intended to gather data from Hawaii or Guam, but unexpectedly got caught in the northeasterly stream which took it to the U.S. The first Chinese response was to say "[Sorry](#)" but this quickly turned to [belligerence](#).

The balloon was [part of](#) 'China's hybrid

communications architecture' that relays surveillance data to satellites in low Earth orbit and back to Chinese ground stations. It was just another of some 30 previous surveillance balloon flights.

The U.S. military was aware of the balloon, but the first publicly reported sighting was on 1 February, when civilians on a commercial airliner spotted it. On the same day, a Billings, Montana newspaperman saw the balloon overhead. The U.S. [Federal Aviation Administration](#) had already closed the airspace around Billings so the U.S. Government was well aware of its presence. In fact, they had been tracking the balloon since it left Hainan.

When news of the balloon went public, U.S. [paranoia](#) reached fever pitch with demands to shoot it down. President [Joe Biden](#) originally intended to do just that, but was persuaded not to do so by the Pentagon. The USAF had been watching the balloon continuously over the U.S. with [E-3 Sentry AWACS](#) aircraft. These planes were specially converted Boeing 707s which were crammed with electronic equipment for gathering intelligence. They could stay on station for eight hours at a time monitoring data being transmitted to Chinese satellites from the balloon.

They could also jam the signals if found to be necessary. The USAF has 34 of these aircraft, ample to have an E-3 on station at all times. In addition to the E-3s, high-altitude [U-2 spy planes](#) flew over the balloon to take pictures and gather data.

The Pentagon persuaded Biden to let the balloon drift on until it cleared land. Since it was now flying

over a number of [Minuteman](#) nuclear missile sites, the paranoia level rose even further. Reasonable statements that Chinese satellites had already pinpointed the sites fell on deaf ears. (Satellites can read car license plates from orbit.) The MAGA Republicans went ballistic themselves, demanding that the President shoot the balloon down. They either didn't understand the Pentagon strategy or just saw this as another opportunity to stir up their base.

On 3 February, U.S. Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) indefinitely postponed what was to be an already tense trip to China, citing the Chinese reconnaissance balloon moving east across the United States as a threat to national security. Blinken had been scheduled to depart for Beijing within days on a trip that was intended to reinforce communication and cooperation between the two countries. But then he told China's director of Central Foreign Affairs Office, [Wang Yi](#), in a [phone call](#) that the balloon was an *'irresponsible act and a clear violation of U.S. sovereignty and international law that undermined the purpose of the trip'*.

Also on 3 February, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that a [second Chinese balloon](#) was passing over Latin America and that China confirmed ownership.

Meanwhile, the first balloon was sweeping rapidly across the country in an arc that would take it to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Some said it was "hovering" over sensitive areas, which would be impossible for a balloon blowing in the wind. Of course, aeronautical expert and ex-President [Donald J Trump](#) called it a [blimp](#) which would have been easier to steer.

The U.S. gun lobby finally got its way on 5 February when an F-22 shot a sidewinder missile into the balloon, shattering the envelope. The debris fell over a "several mile large" area in water 47 feet deep. After a massive U.S. Navy operation, the recovery of debris was completed on 17 February.

[National Security Council](#) spokesperson [John Kirby](#) reported:

"It's a [significant amount](#) of recovered material, including the payload structure as well as some of the electronics and the optics, and all that's now at the FBI laboratory in Quantico."

He added that the United States had already learned a lot about the balloon by observing it as it flew over the United States.

Joe Biden's decision to let the balloon keep flying was vindicated. The MAGA mob, of course, kept up the vitriol. But Biden's respite would be brief, as more balloons were just over the horizon.

On 10 February, The North American Aerospace Defense Command ([NORAD](#)) detected a high-altitude object over the north coast of Alaska. Stung by all the criticism, Biden ordered that it be [shot down](#). An F-22 from Elmendorf Airbase in Anchorage carried out the command. Subsequent searches of the area found no debris.

Then, on 13 February, [another object](#) appeared on radar. Two U.S. F-22 aircraft monitored the target over Alaska, then Canadian aircraft joined as it crossed into Canadian airspace. Following discussions between Canadian Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#) and Biden, an F-22 was authorised to shoot it down with a Sidewinder missile over the Yukon. The pilot reported that it was about the size of a small car. Once again, no debris could be found. UFOs? Rumours were spreading fast and the White House had to put out a statement that there was [no evidence](#) of aliens.

Also on 13 February, another "object" was detected on radar over Lake Huron in Michigan. A senior administration official said President Biden directed that the object be shot down *'out of an abundance of caution and at the recommendation of military leaders'*. He continued that the object was octagonal in structure with strings hanging down, unmanned and travelling at about 20,000 feet. The usual F-22 was sent to do the job, but missed with the first shot and the missile fell into the lake. He nailed it on the second shot. The F-22s now had three kills to their credit.

A senior administration official said Pres. Biden directed that the unidentified object be shot down "out of an abundance of caution and at the recommendation of military leaders." [@rachelvscott](#) reports. <https://t.co/D1BHyOZJ6A>
[pic.twitter.com/4bH1iuGI2Z](https://t.co/4bH1iuGI2Z)

— Good Morning America (@GMA)
[February 13, 2023](#)

All this time, there was one organisation that knew what the "objects" were.

The Northern Illinois [Bottlecap Balloon Brigade](#) knew because they had launched one of them. They flew "Pico" balloons which were sometimes as small as a metre in diameter and cost about \$12. (Pico is a measurement term meaning small.) These balloons carry solar cells and GPS and altitude transmitters at 40,000 feet. They are tracked by amateur radio operators when they transmit. The Balloon Brigade lost contact with its balloon over Alaska on 13 February after it had circled the globe seven times. It notified the FBI, but never learned if the message got passed on.

As for the octagonal object shot down over Lake Huron, a quick Google search for "party balloons" reveals balloons of all shapes and sizes at very reasonable prices. The USAF shot down three party balloons using four Sidewinder missiles and F-22 jets. The missiles cost a half million each for a total of \$2 million plus the cost of flying the F-22s. Total cost of balloons? Probably not more than \$50.

Why haven't the Pico balloons shown up on radar before? Radars have adjustments for sensitivity. It is undesirable for a radar to pick up too much detail. Some years ago, the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System ([BMEWS](#)) detected what it thought was a bunch of Russian missiles coming from the

north. The panic subsided when it realised it was a [flock of geese](#). After the Chinese balloon scare, it cranked up the gain and lo and behold, "Look at all the objects!"

On 20 February, pilots reported seeing a large white balloon floating [over Hawaii](#) at 50,000 feet. Perhaps the Hainan launch crew finally got the winds they were anticipating in the first place. It may be that a simple unexpected change in wind direction has caused major global consequences.

Dr Norm Sanders is a former commercial pilot, flight instructor, university professor, Tasmanian State MP and Federal Senator.

don't shoot .. i'm a blimp :)
[pic.twitter.com/HICiUUMr2q](https://t.co/HICiUUMr2q)

— Papa Hemingway
(@PopHemingway) [February 20, 2023](#)