

The U-2 Program: The DCI's Perspective

George J. Tenet

Editor's Note: On 17 September 1998, CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) held a public symposium at the National Defense University, Fort McNair, Washington, DC. Among the other co-sponsors of this event—entitled “The U-2: A Revolution in Intelligence”—were the Department of Defense, the National Reconnaissance Office, and several US corporations that have been involved in the U-2 program—Lockheed Martin, Eastman Kodak, and Raytheon. The symposium, attended by hundreds of people, had two purposes: (1) to examine the development, operations, and policy impact of the legendary U-2 (Utility-2) reconnaissance aircraft, one of America's most remarkable intelligence achievements, and (2) to honor and commemorate the men and women who participated in this pioneering program—often at great personal risk—either in its early years (the 1950s) or more recently. Participants in the panel discussions at the symposium included pilots and engineers who took part in the U-2 program at its inception, as well as historians, corporation leaders, government policymakers, and authors.

In the first two articles of this edition of Studies in Intelligence, we present American and Soviet/Russian perspectives on the U-2 program from two participants in the symposium. The first article consists of introductory remarks made by the Director of Central Intelligence, George J. Tenet, at the gathering. The second article discusses the U-2 as seen through the eyes of the sole



DCI George J. Tenet

Russian panelist, retired Colonel Alexander Orlov, who was a senior participant in the former USSR's efforts to counter this formidable intelligence collection program.

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. First, I want to thank the CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence and all the other sponsors of this conference for giving me an opportunity that Directors of Central Intelligence seldom get—the chance to boast about a major intelligence **success**.

The U-2 was, indeed, one of the CIA's greatest intelligence achievements. In fact, it may be one of the greatest achievements of any intelligence service of any nation. It was a triumph of government, great industrial partners, and courageous people—a triumph which must be

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George Tenet is the Director of Central Intelligence.

replicated again and again if we are to protect our country. We are fortunate to have this great legacy to build on.

I know that you have an interesting and extensive program ahead of you. I don't want to steal the thunder of the other speakers. I also understand that there will be three panels: one giving the engineers' perspective, another the pilots' view, and a third one that will examine the U-2's impact on policy. You will even have the privilege of hearing from one of our former opponents—and a worthy opponent indeed—Colonel Orlov.

I am not an engineer or a pilot. And Directors of Central Intelligence are supposed to steer clear of policy. But I will bring you the perspective of a DCI in the post-Cold War period—one who is enormously proud of the CIA's instrumental role in pioneering the U-2 program.

I know that I—and I suspect that some of you—have compared our age and the Cold War era and, with 20-20 hindsight, have been tempted to declare the Cold War era a simpler time. I am not so sure.

When you read Dwight Eisenhower's and Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs, and histories of that time—whether you read the **unclassified**, the **classified**, or the **declassified** versions (and I hope you have noted the wealth of U-2 material that we have declassified)—it is clear that a great deal was at stake. The future of the world hung in the balance—and everyone was operating in the dark.

Henry Kissinger once described the Cold War behavior of the United States and the Soviet Union as being

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“like two heavily armed men feeling their way around a room, each believing himself in mortal peril from the other, whom he assumes to have perfect vision. Each tends to ascribe to the other a consistency, foresight, and coherence that his own experience belies.”

Both Eisenhower and Khrushchev were feeling their way toward a relaxation of tensions, but each lacked the ability to understand—let alone trust—the motives and behavior of the other. For his part, Eisenhower feared a surprise attack and war by miscalculation. We desperately needed to be able to penetrate the Iron Curtain—actually more like an Iron Box, since it was closed to us on all sides. We desperately needed to know what the Soviets' capabilities and intentions were.

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cult national security decisions. In short, we were blind.

It was in this grim context that President Eisenhower asked the Central Intelligence Agency to pull together and direct the U-2 program. Then-DCI Allen Dulles put his special assistant, Richard Bissell, in charge. Bissell pulled together brilliant talent from academia, from industry, and from the military—inspired talent such as MIT's James Killian and Harvard's James Baker, who is with us this morning; Polaroid's Edwin Land; Lockheed's Kelly Johnson, America's foremost aeronautical engineer; and Trevor Gardner, another gifted engineer from the private sector who had come into government as Assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force for R&D.

The mission was daunting: to design, build, and fly a photographic reconnaissance plane that could fly over the Soviet Union at a higher altitude than any plane had flown before. They also would have to develop high-acuity cameras to peer deep into the Soviet Union and establish a photointerpretation center to analyze the imagery that was acquired. A worldwide covert operation would have to be orchestrated to support the overflights. And, last but not least, they would have to hire and train pilots to fly these totally new planes through hostile airspace.

Bissell once remarked that when he and his team were given the U-2 assignment, “nobody had really worked out how anything was to be done; nobody knew where it would be developed, where flight-testing could be done, where people could be trained or by whom, who could fly it or anything.” In other words, they knew a lot more than most of



U-2 prototype

us do in Washington when we start an important project!"

Kelly Johnson and his Skunkworks crew began by cleaning out an old hangar at Lockheed. Eighty-eight days later, they had a prototype. The U-2 project came in on time and under budget—a rarity here in Washington!

The U-2 gave us eyes to see inside the Iron Box. It instantly became a major source of our intelligence about the Soviet Union. It constituted nothing less than a revolution in intelligence.

Like other revolutions, even successful ones, the U-2 program entailed high risk, and it broke some eggs. I will conveniently leave it to the experts at this conference to debate the costs and benefits of sending U-2 missions over an increasingly incensed Soviet Union in the run-up to the Four-Power Paris Summit of 1960. Eisenhower certainly agonized over his decision to go forward with the missions.

And I leave it to the historians to critique how both Eisenhower and Khrushchev responded to the down-

ing of Francis Gary Powers' plane, and the consequences that flowed from their handling of it.

But I can and will say this: From the U-2 data captured by our overflights—data corroborated by other means—President Eisenhower could confidently resist the fierce domestic pressure to engage in a massive arms buildup. He knew for certain—**for certain**—that we had no bomber gap and no missile gap with the Soviet Union, despite all Soviet boasting to the contrary. By any measure, that was an intelligence triumph.

The men and women who worked long and hard—and often took great risks—for the U-2's early successes can be forever proud of that. I know that many of you are here this morning. You, who lived with the project for months and even years, can attest better than I to the challenges and frustrations you faced and overcame. And you who saw colleagues and loved ones die in the line of duty know far better than I the human cost of those risky test-flights and reconnaissance missions.

Forty-five pilots and support personnel lost their lives during the first 20 years of the program. Today we honor their memory, their courage, and their devotion to country. I am pleased that so many family members could attend this conference. We all want you to know how grateful our nation is to the fathers and sons whom you lost. We hope that you will derive some small comfort from knowing that their work was invaluable, and from knowing that they have bequeathed a precious legacy to our country.

The U-2 program went on to make a critical difference during the Cuban missile crisis, and it helped save the lives of our forces during the war in Indochina. Since 1974, the program has been under the aegis of the Air Force, whose private-industry mission partners include Lockheed Martin, Raytheon Systems, and Eastman Kodak—the gracious co-sponsors of this conference.

Today, new generations of U-2s perform high-altitude weather research, earth resources surveys, communications satellite and aerial mapping, as well as strategic reconnaissance. But the living legacy of our U-2 pioneers goes beyond that. To this day, we are drawing important lessons from their experience. Let me explain.

Just as it was during the early days of the Cold War, the vital mission of the Central Intelligence Agency and US intelligence as a whole is to give strategic warning and to provide the President with the information and analysis he cannot get from anywhere else—information and analysis which give our country unparalleled unilateral advantage.

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The post-Cold War threat environment presents an array of daunting challenges. We no longer confront a single, massive, global threat from a rival superpower. But we must deal with a host of other threats which can be extremely lethal and destabilizing, and which are linked in unprecedented ways—proliferation, terrorism, regional crises, the fallout of humanitarian disasters.

Now we must worry as much about hard-to-detect small-scale biological weapons producers as we do about the large-scale nuclear weapons programs. And we must help our military achieve dominance in situations ranging from peacekeeping to sustained combat.

To be effective, we must also be fast, because everything is happening faster—whether it is the financial dealings of a cyber-banking narco-trafficker, the communication of sophisticated military technology via the Internet, or the spread of the Asian financial crisis in our globalized world.

In such an age of rapid geopolitical and technological transformation and growing transnational threats, the CIA and our entire Intelligence Community:

- Must be smart, bold, and agile.
- Must work smoothly across disciplines—lashing collection to analysis—and across intelligence agencies.
- Must coordinate more closely than ever with our military.

- And must maintain our tight partnerships with industry to leverage capabilities from the private sector to support our fundamental collection and intelligence work. For if we do not, in this era of explosive technological growth, we will not be able to maintain our strategic edge.

In short, we must follow the lead of those who came before us—the legacy of ingenuity and patriotism that marked the development of the U-2.

In fact, today's tests of success in this post-Cold War era would come as no surprise to Kelly Johnson, and to our other U-2 visionaries from inside and outside the Intelligence Community. Indeed, that is precisely how they worked, and why they triumphed.

Roman Rudenko, the Soviets' chief prosecutor in the Francis Gary Powers trial, called our U-2 program “a graphic example of criminal collusion between a big American capitalist company, an espionage center, and the US military.” Pretty close.

In all seriousness, our U-2 revolutionaries got it right. They were brilliant. They were willing to think big and think different and take risks. They drew ideas, information, and strength from a variety of disciplines and from each other. And they formed public-private partnerships that would last.

Their legacy is in action today. We have only to look at the CIA's dynamic relationships with all the sponsors of this U-2 Conference: the US Air Force, the Department of Defense, the National Reconnaissance Office, Lockheed Martin, Eastman Kodak, and Raytheon!

The dedicated men and women of the Central Intelligence Agency are proud of the vital role our Agency played in the pioneering U-2 program. We applaud the lasting contributions of our U-2 collaborators. And we remain committed to a dynamic and productive partnership with them in the challenging decades to come.

Before closing, I want to say a special thanks to the pilots, from Carmine Vito to the U-2 pilots of today. The courage that Carmine and his colleagues showed made an enormous difference to the security of our country. These men allowed generations of Americans to live in peace and prosperity. On behalf of all Americans, I want to thank you, Carmine, and all your co-pilots and colleagues, for your great and selfless heroism. And to General Chuck Simpson and all the great pilots under his command today, thank you for carrying on the legacy of greatness that has been passed down to you, for the passion you have for the U-2 mission, and for the leadership you show to young pilots who are making their own history.

The revolution in intelligence that our U-2 program launched continues to this day, and I am confident that it will continue to serve our nation's security and world peace well into the 21st century. Thank you.