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Mapping & Cheating

Special Space Committee Meeting
1500 hours, 24 June 1963
Secretary's Conference Room
Department of State

Further Action Under NSC Action 2454

Background

1. The President, in NSC Action 2454 dated 10 July 1962, approved, with certain modifications, the 18 recommendations of the ad hoc committee established by NSAM 156 to consider means of protecting our reconnaissance satellite program while permitting a continuation of efforts in the fields of arms control and international cooperation in space. Recommendation No. 4 of NSC Action 2454 stated, inter alia that:

"4. Further studies should be made on an urgent basis to determine whether there are releasable data, such as mapping information...which would help create wider public acceptance of space observations and photography."

2. Dr. Charyk assumed responsibility for developing a draft plan wherein photography obtained through military satellite observation programs might be used in a program designed to achieve the above objective, should a decision to proceed with such a program be forthcoming. For the past ten months an officer assigned this task by Dr. Charyk as been collaborating with Mr. Garthoff of State in the preparation of the enclosed plan. This plan, which was disseminated to members of the Special Committee by Dr. McMillan, by memorandum of 7 June, is to be the topic of discussion at the Special Committee Meeting today. (TAB JOHNSON MEMO).

Summary of Draft Plan

3. The immediate purpose of the draft plan, as described in Dr. McMillan's forwarding memorandum, is "to provide for committee discussion examples of the type of mapping material which is available, together with a tentative outline of procedures to be followed in the event there is a decision made to release photographs taken by the U.S. Satellite Reconnaissance Program." Dr. McMillan cautioned that the preparation of this plan is not to be interpreted as an endorsement or recommendation by the Department of Defense that public release should be made of any photographs obtained from the Satellite Reconnaissance Program.

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The draft plan sets forth a tentative program designed to support the U.S. position regarding the legality of photographic observation from outer space by the systematic and carefully controlled release of a series of strips of mapping photography and the maps made therefrom. Each of five series of releases envisaged covers an area selected to achieve certain impacts. The first series, for example, which would embrace a strip of North America including parts of both the U.S. and Canada, is intended to validate by precedent the legality of photography of foreign territory taken without the permission of the country involved. Each of the four subsequent series of releases is designed to achieve certain other specific impacts and objectives. These would involve, in sequence, a section of South America, a portion of the southeastern United States and part of the Caribbean Sea (to include Cuba), the continent of Antarctica, and Australia and Africa. The time frame envisaged for release of the entire series is approximately nine months, with the decision regarding release of each series to be made only after careful evaluation of the impacts and reactions to the preceding release.

4. The plan includes a rationale to accompany each series of releases and provides for a progressive improvement of the quality of photography in each series from an initial resolution of about 800ft/side to about 400ft/side in the fifth and final series. The explanation of the program that has been developed for public release states that, in connection with other research studies concerning the peaceful uses of space, the U.S. has successfully obtained meaningful terrestrial photographs that have many beneficial uses. Neither the general public release nor the rationale accompanying each series of releases, however, relates the photography to any particular U.S. space project.

Discussion

5. The discussion by the Special Committee will probably center primarily, or at least initially, on the advisability of going ahead at this time with implementing the program as set forth in the draft plan. A listing of some of the advantages and disadvantages of implementation and a brief discussion of each follows:

Advantages

(1) Implementation of the program would further the pursuit of the U.S. policy objective of legitimizing photographic observation from space by appreciably increasing the volume of space-acquired photography in the public domain. The only such photography released to date is that acquired by the

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Tiros weather satellite program and that obtained by the astronauts (and cosmonauts). The greater the volume of space acquired photography in the public domain the more difficult will be the obstacle confronting a nation that might later decide to question the legality of such photography.

(2) Implementation of the proposed plan would provide a broad platform for public statements and other measures intended to strengthen the legitimacy of photographic observation from outer space. Presently we are limited to TIROS (with NIMBUS soon to follow) and the astronauts as the only specific examples of U.S. space-acquired photography. With these exceptions, our public statements must be couched as principles or generalities rather than reflections of actual practice.

(3) Implementation of the draft plan would enable us to pursue our objective of legitimizing photography from space by using a program which should have a strong appeal for a large number of the lesser developed nations of the world. The potentialities of mapping through space photography offer such an important improvement in capabilities achievable through other mapping means that at least some of the nations with large unmapped or inadequately mapped regions would be expected to react with considerable enthusiasm.

(4) Implementation of the program envisaged would strengthen the documentary basis for the frequent public acknowledgements by United States Spokesman, that much of the work being done in space research and exploration for scientific and other purposes can have military applications. Aside from the military value of better maps, however, the quality of photography involved in the draft plan would actually provide few tangible examples of this theme. With the resolutions envisaged, little of military interest other than large airfields and major industrial areas would be discernible.

Disadvantages

(1) Implementation of the draft plan would, in effect, constitute acknowledgement that the United States is presently engaged in a satellite reconnaissance program and would therefore entail most of the risks and disadvantages inherent in such an acknowledgement. These disadvantages stem from the fact that an acknowledgement, once forthcoming, cannot be revoked. Once we have acknowledged our satellite reconnaissance program our only further options are to continue the program regardless of the Soviet reaction or to discontinue the program. The options available to the Soviets, once the acknowledgement (and concomitant challenge) is forthcoming, are limited only by Soviet capabilities for countermeasures and by the lengths the Soviets would elect to go to terminate or obstruct that program.

(a) The acknowledgement would result from the fact that, whereas in all of the information released with our civilian space programs we identify the specific project involved, in the plan under consideration, the source of the photography released would remain unidentified. Such a departure from precedent would clearly indicate that this photography emanated from the military share of the national space program - and would thus constitute irrefutable evidence of that military engaging in photographic observation of the territory of other countries.

(b) It might be possible to avoid the disadvantage described above by announcing that NASA is engaging in a mapping program using photography acquired through terrestrial observation from space and by then actually mounting under NASA sponsorship some photographic observation missions (using the present Air Force capability) to support this program. If feasible, such a project would provide a basis of association for the photography released which would not entail identification with the military share of the national space effort.

(2) The interest generated by implementation of draft plan would be expected to provoke a rash of questions from media throughout the world; questions regarding source, purpose, etc.; that we would probably be unable to answer satisfactorily. In effect, from a security point of view, we would return to the public affairs dilemma which existed prior to the promulgation of the Department of Defense Directive in the Spring of 1962 which stemmed the flow of public information regarding military space programs.

(3) Closely related to the disadvantage described above, implementation of the draft plan would also be expected to provoke a rash of penetrating questions regarding the quality of the photography involved. We would be hard pressed to provide convincing reasons why the quality is not better unless the rationale is modified to permit association of the photography with some program which would not logically be expected to produce better photography. Such an alleged association, however, unless based on an actual program, would be highly vulnerable to disprove.

(4) While we would not expect the Soviet Union to be misled by the poor quality of photography involved in the releases envisaged in the draft plan, there would possibly be an adverse reaction in friendly and neutral countries. Should the trend of media speculation conclude generally that the photography released probably represents our best capability, a conviction could develop among an appreciable segment of the public of allied and neutral countries that the confidence displayed by the U.S. in recent years regarding such matters as the "missile gap", has a false foundation.

Conclusions

6. We understand that the intelligence community and the Joint Chief of Staff consider our satellite reconnaissance capability to be one of the most vital contributors to the present favorable balance in U.S.-Soviet strategic capabilities. Under present circumstances, therefore, retention of this capability is one of the foremost national security requirements of this country. Until such time as this capability is adjudged to be less critical (i.e., until such time as the intelligence collection thus produced can be duplicated through such other means as inspection under arms control arrangements or until the criticality of the requirement for continuing surveillance of the Soviet Union is reduced by existence of stable or fully hardened Soviet strategic delivery forces) virtually any measure that would entail risk to our satellite reconnaissance capability would have very serious implications from the national security viewpoint.

7. While listing of disadvantages under paragraph 5 above is not entirely conclusive regarding the degree of risk that implementation of the draft plan would entail for our satellite reconnaissance capabilities, some degree of risk is unquestionable and present. It is possible that certain measures can be undertaken that would remove the element of risk. Thoroughgoing studies of such measures could be completed, however, and the results exhaustively weighed before a decision to proceed along the lines envisaged in the plan is taken. At a minimum, studies on the following should be undertaken:

a. The feasibility of an actual NASA sponsored program of mapping using terrestrial photography acquired from space should be fully explored. The purpose of this study would center primarily on finding means of avoiding either directly or indirectly acknowledging the existence of an operational military satellite reconnaissance program.

b. A contingency plan for implementation should the Soviets undertake overt or covert countermeasures against U.S. satellite reconnaissance should be developed. The need for such a plan has long existed. A contingency plan in which we have considerable confidence should be approved before any measures are taken which involve risk of provoking Soviet countermeasures against our satellite reconnaissance program.

Recommended Position

8. It is recommended that the Department of Defense members of the Special Committee take the following position with respect to implementation of the

draft plan under consideration.

a. Implementation of a program such as that envisaged in the draft plan would involve an element of risk to our satellite reconnaissance program that outweighs the probable advantages that would accrue.

b. A decision regarding implementation of such a program should be deferred indefinitely or at a minimum, until collateral studies are completed on:

The feasibility of initiating a NASA-sponsored photographic mapping program, and

The development of a contingency plan covering possible overt or covert Soviet countermeasures against our satellite reconnaissance program