

THE WHITE HOUSE  
Washington

July 8, 1965

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MEMORANDUM FOR

THE VICE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Organization and Public Position on Manned Orbiting  
Laboratory

The proposed Manned Orbiting Laboratory is now directed toward a full-scale prototype of a manned high resolution reconnaissance satellite. If the decision is made to go ahead with this project on this basis, it is extremely important that the administrative organization and the public explanation of the project be handled in such a way as to avoid jeopardizing either the eventual utilization of the MOL or our existing satellite reconnaissance program. It has been the general policy of the US Government for the past few years to build international acceptance of satellite reconnaissance without openly revealing the nature or extent of our activities in a manner that would force the Soviets to react publicly against satellite reconnaissance. So far, this policy has worked extremely well.

The MOL project was introduced by Secretary McNamara as a substitute for DYNASOAR to explore the possible military use of space and has been widely associated by the technical press with a wide range of military systems including reconnaissance and weapons delivery. Therefore, despite the growing tacit acceptance of unmanned satellite reconnaissance, there is certainly a danger that the Soviets will consider MOL to be a military overflight of their country and will either demand that such flights not be undertaken or will use this program as a pretext for a demand that we stop our entire satellite reconnaissance program. In this connection, it should be noted that intelligence indicates that the Soviets may well be developing an anti-satellite system that would be able to destroy our present reconnaissance satellites.

On the other hand, we may be greatly exaggerating this problem since world-wide public interest and enthusiasm for manned space flight with its obvious implications for observation from space may have the effect

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of accelerating international acceptance of satellite observation and minimize the possible impact of any future Soviet objections. Although this may prove to be the case, our satellite reconnaissance program is such a valuable national resource that extreme care must be taken in planning the way in which the program is handled.

The immediate problem is to determine how the program should be introduced, since it will be more than three years before the first manned prototype of MOL is launched. During this period, there will hopefully be a continuing evolution of the process of international acceptance of satellite observation creating a better atmosphere for acceptance of MOL.

The following alternatives cover the most obvious types of organization and associated public position that should be considered in determining the best way to handle this program:

Alternative I - AF program with open statement of observation objectives.

This approach would avoid the difficult problem of providing a cover for the program by facing the issue directly and determining the Soviet response, if any, at the outset. The observation payload could be handled as a normal classified project. By specifically identifying space observation as an objective of the program, it would tend to eliminate the implication that other military systems, possibly involving weapons, were under development. The impact of the observation mission could be muted somewhat by projecting it as a future capability and by describing it as a possible tool for maintenance of the peace as an inspection device for arms control agreements. If this went unchallenged, it would essentially accomplish the objective of obtaining international acceptance of satellite observation.

Nevertheless, despite any efforts we may make to associate satellite observation with peaceful objectives, such an approach would constitute a direct confrontation of the Soviets on the issue of satellite observation and would have the maximum possibility of triggering an immediate strong response on their part that could endanger not only the future of MOL but also our entire reconnaissance satellite program.

Alternative II - AF program without a stated observation mission. This program would be identified as a research project to determine the ability of man to contribute to a wide range of activities that might have some future utility for the military use of space. The observation payload in

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this case would have to be handled as a "black" program. Any questions as to a possible reconnaissance mission would be answered by reiterating the general exploratory nature of the program including examples of the type of unclassified experiments that would be conducted. This approach would give the program a clear military image and might suggest future weapons delivery systems as well as reconnaissance. It would almost certainly be deduced by the Soviets and the public that our true objectives were in the reconnaissance area. It would not, however, present the Soviets with a direct confrontation to which they might feel they had to react.

Alternative III - Air Force program with NASA participation. This program would be explained as part of the national space effort to determine the ability of man to perform useful space missions. It could be explained that the management of the program had been given to the Air Force in view of NASA's over-riding responsibility to complete successfully the Apollo mission during the same time period. NASA would, however, participate in developing the scientific experiments for the program. This approach would give the program a much more peaceful image, and at the same time would probably be acceptable to all but the most vociferous proponents of the military role of space. Although the observation payloads would have to be handled in the "black" under this program, both the Soviets and the informed public would probably soon conclude that the true purpose of the program was directed toward reconnaissance. This approach raises the serious question as to whether or not we wish to associate our peaceful space program in NASA with the National Reconnaissance Program and what impact this might have on NASA's international activities. Furthermore, such a joint program would probably increase existing friction between DoD and NASA on roles and missions.

Alternative IV - NASA-directed program with Air Force conduct of operations. This approach would have by far the most peaceful public image. It would, however, make NASA directly responsible for a clandestine reconnaissance system. Given NASA's otherwise open method of operation, it seems very improbable that this would not become public knowledge very soon with a radical impact on NASA's over-all peaceful image. This approach would probably present very serious management problems between the Air Force and NASA. It would also fail to respond to the pressures for a greater role for the Air Force in space which has been a basic element in the decision to go ahead with MOL in the first place.

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The process of working out the details of any of these alternatives is a complicated job that should be completed and coordinated before any decision on this program is publicly announced.

/s/ Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr.

Initialed by McGeorge Bundy

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