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In Memoriam
Jimmie D. Hill

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Former Deputy Director of the National Reconnaissance Office

(11 April 1982 to 26 February 1996)

Former NRO Staff Director

(12 June 1978 to 9 April 1982)

(U) A tall man in stature, Jimmie Hill commanded a room not only in appearance but also in his mannerisms. His soft smile, quiet sense of humor, and friendly nature naturally drew others toward him in conversation. Once engaged in talk with him, one came to recognize his sound judgment and intellect—qualities that made him such an asset to the NRO and to all areas of business that he touched.

(U) Jimmie Dale Hill was born on December 28, 1933 in Fort Worth, Texas, during the Great Depression. At the time, no one could have foreseen the technological developments Hill would come to witness and the major role he would play in a yet to be conceived top secret organization. But lessons in helpfulness, honor, and humility that shaped his character from early in his life, through his military career, and into his civilian and industrial jobs, made him one of the most remarkable and respected leaders in the fifty-year history of the United States' National Reconnaissance Office (NRO).



Jimmie D. Hill as Deputy Director/NRO, 1990s official photograph (Source: CSNR Reference Collection)

(U) Preparation for the important role he would come to play began early in his life. The ease with which he picked up on new ideas and displayed a "knack" for technical concepts without formal training was evident early on as a teenager. A year after he was born, Hill's family moved to Chapman Ranch outside Corpus Christi. When Hill was six years old and ready to begin school, his father bought a grocery store and decided to move the family into town. As Hill entered high school, following World War II, his father went into the home-building business, and Hill helped him build "shotgun" houses: small frame, inexpensive homes. It was here that Hill learned basic carpentry skills that he would continue to hone and develop throughout his life.

(U) Hill's military career began early as he enlisted in the Texas National Guard at the young age of 14. While enlisted, he began his military training and attended two summer camps. The Korean War broke out as he approached his 17th birthday, and his unit prepared to be activated. On December 8, 1950, just before Hill's 17th birthday, he enlisted in the United States Air Force (USAF) and moved to San Antonio, Texas, for his Air Force training. Because of his National Guard experience, he was made drill instructor for the short time he was there. Unknowingly, Hill was gaining experience that prepared him for an expansive career in space reconnaissance. After only six months in San Antonio, the USAF moved Hill to Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, Colorado, where he attended technical school for aerial photography and camera repair. Upon completion of school, Hill's new assignment took him to Germany where he was assigned to support RB-36 aerial photography missions. Because there were no RB-36s in Europe, Hill instead spent the next three years on the flight line as an aircraft mechanic. While stationed in Germany, Hill attended night school and completed his high school education.

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(U) In 1954, Hill returned to the United States as a staff sergeant stationed at McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas. Hill was discharged from the Air Force in January 1955 and returned to Corpus Christi to continue his education. He enrolled in Del Mar College where he studied business and mathematics from 1955 to 1957. During his first semester, the USAF contacted him and requested that he re-enlist. He agreed to do so in May 1955 and continued at school fulltime while working in the evenings with the Civil Defense Program to start a Ground Observer Core, a program to prevent against air attack in which civilians searched the sky for enemy aircraft with only the naked eye and binoculars. In 1956, while still in Corpus Christi, Hill married Martha who would remain his wife for over 55 years.

(U) As a newly married man, he applied to Officer Candidate School (OCS), but was turned down. Disappointed, but not one to dwell on rejection, he moved on, taking a new military assignment in Oklahoma City. While working, Hill attended the University of Oklahoma and studied business. The following year, Hill was reassigned to an isolated tour in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. While stationed there, Hill taught English, math, and pre-flight navigation to Royal Saudi Air Force cadets. After about a year, Hill reapplied for and was accepted to OCS. In 1959, he left Jeddah for San Antonio and school. After being commissioned a second lieutenant, Hill was reassigned to San Antonio. He spent the next five years stationed in Texas, New Mexico, Kansas, and eventually Taiwan, working various positions in accounting and finance. In Taipei, Taiwan, the USAF promoted Hill to captain and in that rank, he worked as comptroller as a part of the U.S. Air Force Security Service, his first position in intelligence.

(U) In 1965, the Air Force assigned Hill to Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. In the middle of the move, the USAF cancelled Hill's orders; they appointed him instead to a special assignment in Los Angeles called the Secretary of the Air Force Special Projects. Regardless that the position was deemed "special," Hill's vision of a Hawaii assignment, with the move already underway, prompted him to make calls to have the orders reversed. Finally General John L. Martin, Commander of Special Projects in Los Angeles, informed Hill that the more he tried to get the orders changed, the more he was convinced Hill was perfect for the job. Hill reported to Air Force Special Projects at the end of 1965. According to Hill, it was "the best thing that ever happened to me in my career."

~~(S//TK//REL)~~ For the next five years, 1966 through 1971, Jimmie Hill worked at the Secretary of the Air Force Special Projects (SP) Office in El Segundo, California, or Program A, the Air Force branch of the highly classified NRO. His initial assignment was to SP-12, the comptroller/accounting/finance program control office, working under Colonel Dave Bradburn with the sigint portion of the organization. During his time there, the biggest question they faced was whether or not the Soviet Union was developing an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense system. Concern over this Soviet SA-6 program resulted in the development of [redacted] Hill was selected for Major and continued working at SP, primarily in SIGINT programs. While stationed in El Segundo, Hill made important contacts that paved the way for the rest of his career at the NRO. (b)(1) (b)(3)

~~(S//REL)~~ In 1969, Hill was contacted by Harold Brownman, head of what became the CIA Office of Development and Engineering (OD&E) for NRO's Program B, and Leslie Dirks, one of Mr. Brownman's deputies, to join the competitive program they were developing, Zaman (later the Kennen [redacted] program), the first real-time imaging system. In 1971, Hill made the transfer as an Air Force officer assigned to the CIA and began work on Zaman, for NRO's Program B in Washington, D.C. Hill spent the next 18 months working in Program Control and Business Management trying to put some credibility into the CIA's cost estimating. (b)(1) (b)(3)

~~(S//REL)~~ Hill left the Zaman/Kennen [redacted] program in 1973 after General Lew Allen recruited him to work on a newly created Intelligence Community Staff. Hill was given responsibility for the National Reconnaissance Program (NRP) and the Special Navy Program. In this position, Hill experienced first-hand the bitter relationship between the Air Force element of the NRO, Program A, and (b)(1) (b)(3)

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the CIA element, Program B, which, according to Hill, was "driven largely by the fact that the Air Force people felt that CIA would manipulate the intelligence requirements to come up with or justify whatever program they wanted." During this time Hill also witnessed the gradual shift in power, putting the Director Central Intelligence (DCI) rather than the Secretary of Defense in control of the NRP. That "was one of the most significant changes that took place."

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(U) In 1973 and early 1974, Director of the NRO (DNRO) John McLucas retired, Gerald Ford became President, and James Plummer was assigned DNRO. The change in leadership trickled down throughout the organization and DNRO Plummer asked Hill to take over as NRO Comptroller. With 10 years enlisted and 13 years as an officer, Major Hill retired from the Air Force on 28 February 1974 and took the NRO comptroller position as an Air Force civilian. In his four years as NRO Comptroller, he worked under four different DNROs (to include acting DNRO Dr. Charles Cook). Hill was exposed to several major controversies including the termination of [redacted] the loss of the Iranian telemetry collection sites in Iran known as TACSMAN 1 and 2, and evaluating the dependency on NASA's Space Shuttle for launch of NRO satellites. This last effort put him at odds with the then current DNRO Hans Mark who had come into office in August 1977. Hill disagreed with DNRO Mark's emphasis on the shuttle and believed that committing to support the Shuttle and shuttle-dependent programs "proved to be a disadvantage to the NRO." Even in disagreement, Hill was known for his calm demeanor and for discussing differences rather than becoming argumentative. These qualities are just part of what made him an ideal leader.

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(U) Despite their differences, DNRO Mark recognized Hill's potential and in 1978, DNRO Mark appointed Hill Director, Office of Space Systems, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force. In this assignment he also served as staff director of the NRO. DNRO Mark claimed that appointing Hill "was the best move I ever made." Hill, in his humility, expressed hesitancy that he wasn't the right person for the job. Despite his concern and lack of a technical degree, Hill accepted the challenge and proved more than capable for the job. His brilliant, intellectual mind allowed Hill to understand the technological side of things. DNRO Mark claimed that "nine times out of ten, his judgment on technical issues was right even though he had no technical background, which to me was just totally remarkable. I don't think I've ever seen anyone who's more dedicated to the organization . . . He was absolutely indispensable." DNRO Mark later explained that "Hill had an encyclopedic knowledge of Air Force space systems as well as a first-class intelligence that he applied to the problems at hand. By taking positions that were generally opposed to mine, we usually arrived at workable compromises that could be implemented." DNRO Mark wanted to take Hill with him to NASA when he left the NRO, but DNRO Hermann kept Hill at the NRO. Hill was eventually appointed Deputy Director of the NRO in 1982.

(U) In his 14 years as Deputy Director, Hill served with Directors Edward "Pete" Aldridge, Martin Faga, and Jeffrey Harris. Hill's extensive experience in the NRO proved indispensable to each of the DNROs with whom he served. Hill was part of an important power shift in the upper management of the NRO, by shaping decisions regarding new overhead reconnaissance systems developed during his 14 year tenure, and laying a new foundation for the NRO to enter a new century. Hill took on more and more responsibility, becoming "the day-to-day operating officer, while the DNRO dealt with policy matters and such," according to Gen. Lew Allen. This increase in responsibility as deputy director prepared Hill for when he was called upon to lead the NRO between appointees, while serving as acting director.

(U) From December 1988 to September 1989 and again from March 1993 to May 1994, Hill led the NRO as acting director. Maj. Gen. Ralph H. Jacobson said, "Jimmie is a solid citizen, and we all owe him a lot for holding this outfit together...when there had not been a political appointee." He was careful in his role as acting director which totaled new two years of his service. Martin Faga, the DNRO who served

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between Hill's two terms as acting director, explained that "Jim is one of those few people who are handed great power, refuses to use it all, and did only what he thought he should do, and trying to leave everything open for the new director that he possibly could." Hill did his best to administer to the needs of the NRO and keep it on course, but he left setting direction and policy to the incoming DNRO. According to DNRO Harris, "he understood the stewardship of the office and kept all the trains running on time and was a great patriot."

(U) During the 1980s, Hill witnessed the shift in the NRO, which eventually led to the dissolution of the separate programs and eventual collocation. Hill later explained that he watched the NRO programs "evolve from a very healthy competition early on to one, at least in my view, that became very destructive toward the end of the 1980s." Hill was instrumental in guiding the NRO through its most significant changes: the declassification of the "fact of" the NRO in September 1992, the dissolving of the program structure and realignment of the NRO along functional lines in 1992, and the building of the Westfields Headquarters complex and eventual collocation of the NRO there in 1995.

(U) Hill was known for his no-nonsense approach. He was thorough. He stood for credibility. He didn't shy away from the truth. When it came to budget discrepancies and deficiencies, he advised honesty: "We're going to be consistent, we're not getting creative. Tell them you screwed up. Tell them you need more." This reliability is part of what made him such a vital asset to the NRO and its directors for so many years.

(U) Jimmie Hill retired from government service on February 26, 1996. With his 29 years at the NRO, Hill experienced first-hand more than half of the NRO's history. In his time, he saw two programs develop completely from concept to operation. He once stated that, "I don't think there is anything as gratifying as it is to see a program go from concept to operations in one continuous short amount of time." Hill believed deeply in the NRO's critical importance to the security of the nation. In Hill's time, he witnessed the development and evolution of the NRO from its Cold War-era Program A, B, C, and D structure to a new program structure for the beginning of the 21st century, and a structure that saw the end of competition and infighting. He believed that, "The NRO was the career, not a rotation – for both CIA and Air Force – the time elsewhere were the rotations."

(U) In retirement, Hill remained involved in the Intelligence Community by consulting with the NRO, Lockheed-Martin, and The Aerospace Corporation. In 1997, Hill was elected to The Aerospace Corporation's Board of Trustees from which he retired in 2005. He continued to live in Northern Virginia and spend time with his wife, Martha, and their four children [redacted]. In 2013, Director of the National Reconnaissance Office, Betty J. Sapp, named Mr. Hill an NRO Founder, for laying the foundation for an NRO critical to the United States in the 21st Century. (b)(6)

(U) The man who is a legend at the NRO, Jimmie D. Hill, succumbed to his battle with cancer on April 23, 2013. In his 29 years at the NRO, from working in the finance office of the Secretary of the Air Force Special Projects Office to serving as acting NRO director, Hill's dedication and service were unparalleled. He was the steady hand of the NRO. With his passing, the NRO loses a piece of its heritage, but forever recognizes Mr. Hill's legacy in the auditorium named after him. More than the auditorium, a generation of personnel who were privileged to work by his side, will continue to sustain the NRO by drawing from the lessons they learned from Mr. Jimmie D. Hill.

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