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~~(S)~~ NATIONAL RECONNAISSANCE OFFICE  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

THE NRO STAFF

July 9, 1974

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. SINGEL

SUBJECT: NRO Staff Opinion on the USIB Declassification Motion

Utmost care should be taken by our Government to protect the freedom to conduct satellite reconnaissance. Although it is generally agreed that Russia is comfortable with the stabilizing balance of satellite reconnaissance, the lesser developed countries and China pose a political threat similar to that posed by Russia in the early 1960s. The solution created for the earlier threat was to maintain an official national silence about the program.

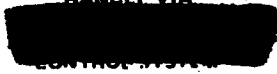
This policy today seems ludicrous on its surface because of the widespread knowledge of the "fact of" the program. However, the policy has actually served to preclude others from voicing political opinion about the program. The U.S. has been in a position of defending the value of earth observation in the international arena because of the openly conducted and sometimes criticized ERTS and SKYLAB activity. The official U.S. position is that it will continue to conduct earth observations because it helps all countries so observed. However, this position could not be made convincingly vis-a-vis satellite reconnaissance.

In addition, satellites still are as fragile and vulnerable as they were at the outset of space reconnaissance even under optimum freedom to operate. Should an irritated nation decide to interfere with one of our satellites, or Russia's, it could do so with modern technology. Furthermore, since our satellites are the only means available to collect much of the required intelligence data, an ultra-conservative security policy should be maintained to protect the continued viability of the program.

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In amplification of the international political situation, the matters of national sovereignty and lawfulness of space observation have not been fully defined in international law. The UN working group on earth resources surveys recently was inconclusive in its position on the legality of data acquisition. Brazil has tabled a treaty which would constrain all forms of data acquisition from space pending permission of the nation observed. Although not much support has been obtained by Brazil for its treaty, other nations may be inclined to take similar constraining actions should the United States begin open discussions of its space reconnaissance program.

The position of the United States with respect to ERTS is that all data are made available immediately to all countries. Unless the United States is willing to do the same with reconnaissance satellite data, then there is not a parallel situation with ERTS.

An estimate provided me by the United Nations Legal Counsel of those nations which would likely raise objection to unconstrained U.S. reconnaissance activities is as follows: Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Iran, India, France, at least some South African nations and China and Russia. With respect to the latter two, China might likely condemn space reconnaissance on its principle if it would cause discomfort to the United States. Russia has voiced a concern that certain United States activities, if discussed in the public domain, might jeopardize U.S.-Russia parallel space interests.

We believe that there is nothing at all to be gained by authorizing acknowledgement and discussion of the "fact of" photographic satellite reconnaissance. The real decision which is being addressed at this time is how many facts about the program would be revealed through the declassification. More pressures than exist today would be created to become more credible about the program. Following historic patterns, once open discussion is enabled, the nature of the photographic and SIGINT reconnaissance programs would be subject to inadvertent



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disclosure without means to protect the valid secrets. Therefore, from both a political and technical sense, there is nothing to be gained and much risk to the nation from pursuing the declassification motion.

[REDACTED]

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