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SUBJECT: National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) Organizational Seal

RESEARCH QUESTION: What is the NRO organizational seal, and how did it come to be established?

ANSWER AND SUMMARY: The NRO adopted its official organizational seal in 1994, two years after the Department of Defense publicly acknowledged the existence of the NRO on 18 September 1992. On 10 February 1993, following this *de facto* declassification of the “fact of” the NRO, the NRO submitted its seal design to The Institute of Heraldry (TIOH).¹

The TIOH approved the design, which is shown in Figure 1.² This official design shows a globe of the Earth set against a white, disc-shaped background and revolved to a position where a blue Atlantic Ocean is visible in the center, bordered on the left by the green landmasses of North and South America, and on the right by Europe and Africa. A red sphere—representing a satellite—orbits the globe following a flight path of white, trimmed with red. Around the outside of the white disc are the words “National Reconnaissance Office,” and “United States of America,” cast in yellow on a blue disc rimmed with gold³ (TIOH, 1993a).

EXPLANATION AND DISCUSSION: The origins of the design for the NRO organizational seal are not entirely clear. Since the “covert” establishment of the NRO on 6 September 1961, with its mission to manage satellite and overflight reconnaissance projects, the organization’s seal had appeared in several iterations, but with each variant featuring the common element of a satellite orbiting a globe (Gilpatric, 1961, p. 1).



Figure 1. The official NRO organizational Seal, as registered with the Institute of Heraldry.

The second NRO Staff director, Major General John L. Martin, offered an explanation for the evolution of NRO’s official seal. He recalled that, in September 1965, when Brockway McMillan was stepping down as DNRO, an Air Force office, SAF/SP (the Secretary of the Air Force Special Projects Office, also known in NRO channels as NRO Program A), presented a certificate to McMillan. The certificate allegedly was from the “Special Academy for Space Progress;” however, such an academy did not exist and was used as a cover to present the certificate.⁴ The seal on that certificate shared common elements with what later

¹ TIOH is a U.S. Army component located at Ft Belvoir, VA. It furnishes heraldic services to the U.S. Armed Forces and other U.S. government organizations. It operates under the authority of Public Law 85-263. (Hames, J. M., 2010)

² Within two months of submission, TIOH rendered a manufacturing drawing and by the end of 1993 produced two plaques. The particular seal pictured in Figure 1 was displayed as a plaque in former NRO Deputy Director Jimmy Hill’s office during his tenure.

³ While the NRO seal has remained largely unchanged from the registered TIOH design, there is one exception. Since at least July 2011, with the implementation of the MS&O branding strategy, the satellite’s orbital path appears to be gold.

⁴ The use of fictitious organizational names, even on documents distributed internally to cleared personnel who possess the broadest intelligence access, demonstrates how closely witting personnel guarded the secret of the NRO’s existence prior to 1992.

would become the official NRO organizational seal, i. e., the design depicted a globe of the earth with a tiny circular satellite in orbit around it. The globe in this particular design for the certificate was balanced on the nose of a skunk standing on its hind legs (Hall, 2004, p. 37).⁵

The first true NRO organizational seal most likely evolved out of a design used for the NRO Staff's cover organization, which was located in room 4C1000 at the Pentagon and known overtly as the "Office of Space Systems, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force." When DNRO John McLucas left his position in 1973 as DNRO⁶ to become the Secretary of the Air Force, the NRO staff presented him with a plaque bearing the words "Office of Space Systems, OSAF." The emblematic design on the plaque had a globe with a satellite circling around it, set amidst the background of a dark blue, star-filled galaxy, (see Figure 2). This design matches the design of branding used in classified national reconnaissance program briefings from the period, and is comparable to the current organizational seal. When NRO personnel presented briefings in classified channels, the briefers replaced the name of the cover organization, "Office of Space Systems, OSAF," with the true name, "National Reconnaissance Office." This, then, apparently served as the basic design through the 1980s during which NRO introduced several design variations reflecting color changes and varying-size stars bracketing the organizational name (see Figure 3; Hall, 2003;).

When the NRO subsequently submitted its design to TIOH as a heraldic device in early 1993, the final design reflected only minimal changes from the various versions of the NRO seal that had been appearing on classified briefing charts as early as the mid-1970s.



Figure 2. Office of Space Systems, OSAF emblem.



Figure 3. A variant of the NRO emblematic design was used in classified briefings through the 1980s.

REFERENCES:

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⁵ The skunk presumably evoked Lockheed's illustrious aircraft design facility, the "Skunk Works," that had been responsible for the U-2 and A-12. According to earlier research, Martin himself received a variant of the same "academy" certificate—sans skunk—when he retired in 1970, the design for which, the general recalled someone in SP creating (Hall 2004, p. 37).

⁶ DNRO McLucas had been dual-hatted as Undersecretary of the Air Force. This appointment conveniently enabled him to openly discuss and defend military programs and budgets associated with national reconnaissance (Hall, 2004).

APPENDIX A: Is it a “Seal,” an “Emblem,” a “Crest,” or “Logo?”

There is a question as to what the NRO emblematic design should be called. Is it a seal, an emblem, a crest, or a logo? Based on our research we concluded it should be called an organizational seal.

Other organizations variously label their identifying symbols as both “emblems” (e.g., the U.S. Air Force) and “crests” (U.S. Navy). Although the terms “seal” and “emblem” are often used interchangeably, there are subtle distinctions. Historically, a seal’s purpose was for authentication of documents and identity. The standard dictionary definition of a seal is “a symbol or mark of office,” but also “a device with a cut or raised emblem, symbol, or word,” suggesting that the seal is the three-dimensional, physical object projecting the emblem.

An “emblem” can be defined as a “symbolic object used as a heraldic device” or “a device, symbol, or figure adopted and used as an identifying mark” for an organization or group. For an organization such as The Institute of Heraldry (TIOH) at Fort Belvoir, VA, however, the distinction is less to do with physical objects and designs than with basic heraldic elements.

For TIOH, an organizational seal would contain all the traditional heraldic elements, often including a coat-of-arms or crest, a shield, and a banner or motto. The seal incorporates the heraldic elements within a circular or disc-shaped design, which, once rendered into a three-dimensional object, becomes known as a plaque. These characteristics distinguish the seal from a logo, which need not contain heraldic elements (Tuohig, 2017; Webster’s, 2004).

An example of these distinctions can be seen in the Marine Corps seal. The Marine Corps seal consists of the Corps’ emblem, displayed on a scarlet background and encircled by a blue band containing the words, “Department of the Navy, U.S. Marine Corps.” So the emblem contains a design of symbolic significance, while the seal incorporates mottos or other words that leave no doubt as to organizational identity. Nevertheless, by tradition, the term used to describe organizational plaques depends upon the organization: the Air Force calls them “emblems,” the Navy, “crests,” and other organizations, “seals.”

APPENDIX B: Specifications for Fabrication of NRO Seal in 1993.⁷

The Institute of Heraldry’s completed manufacturing drawing described the NRO organizational seal as specified in the table below (TIOH, April 15, 1993):

ELEMENTS	COLOR
Globe	Land – Irish Green Water – Ultramarine Blue
Satellite Orbiting the Globe	Satellite – Scarlet Orbit Path – White, Shaded Red
Inner Disc Surrounding Globe	White
Designation Band Surrounding Inner Disc	Old Glory Blue w/ Metallic Gold/Yellow
Letters Within the Band “National Reconnaissance Office” “United States of America”	Metallic Gold/Yellow

⁷ The Institute of Heraldry (TIOH) completed Manufacturing Drawing 6-2-162 on 15 April 1993, and a memo from TIOH Director Gerald Luchino less than three weeks later on 4 May informed the NRO that TIOH was forwarding the completed color drawing, along with a color painting, and a black-and-white line drawing, and that it had initiated a project to fabricate the plaque. Although TIOH had estimated four months for project completion, it wasn’t until mid-December 1993 that the NRO received notice of the forthcoming shipment of two painted plaques, one master plaster cast, and a color reference guide. The NRO paid \$3900.00 for the preparation of the plaques, a painting, the seal drawing, and a black-and-white line drawing, using Military Interdepartmental Purchase Request (MIPR) N93-127 (TIOH, February 10, 1993; TIOH, May 4, 1993; TIOH, December 17, 1993).

RESEARCH TEAM AND POINTS OF CONTACT: Patrick D Widlake, CSNR's Chief Research Officer prepared this note. You may direct questions concerning this or any CSNR research note to the CSNR Query line (703-227-9368) or CSNR's Chief Research Officer (703-227-9062).

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