

SPACE NEWS BLOG

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Guest Blog: Fixing an NRO That Wasn't Broken

Once upon a time, long, long ago, the NRO had something called Program Managers. They were powerful. They controlled resources, they had clear authority to make program decisions, and they were held accountable. The Air Force, CIA, and Navy sent their best, often for entire government careers. Many were committed to the entire life cycle of a particular space program, from conception through operations. They remained in the job, building their expertise, ensuring the mission above all, was successful. They were the elite; they knew it, and they acted like it. As a result, the country was provided capabilities that had a significant role in our nation's ascendancy to superpower status.

But, as I say, this was a long time ago.

Along the way, terrible things happened. These program managers delivered capabilities that lasted longer than the engineers planned, performed better than expected, and sometimes they used less money than estimated to get the job done. Often, they built capabilities that leveraged technology to provide additional new capabilities that exceeded their mission partners' expectations.

Something had to be done.

Control of the resources, and with it the ability to make timely, good program management decisions, had to be taken away; first away from the program manager, and then from the organization. The principal tool to manage risk and thereby effectively manage a program was seriously restricted. The 'single' budget line which provided flexibility for the organization to manage development issues across the National Reconnaissance portfolio was replaced with a bevy of budgetary control lines to arbitrarily restrict resources such as only those on a particular spacecraft. These moves were made to ensure the NRO wouldn't have the resources or flexibility to over-engineer ever again.

In fact, somewhere along the way the idea of allowing these engineers to stay focused on the mission gave way to restricting their length of stay. These engineers had to be rotated, and rotated often! I've searched without success for a model that supports how changing personnel throughout a program's development helps, so I am not sure who we should give credit for this contribution.

But Washington was just getting started fixing this problem. The Packard Commission on efficient acquisition must have had it wrong when they noted NRO acquisition excellence.

The U.S. could no longer stand for this technically arrogant organization building eye-watering capabilities all on its own. They needed help, and lots of it. Who better to make decisions about how to design spacecraft and manage complex acquisitions than people who are not directly responsible, nor held accountable, and typically have never built them before? Staff! There's lots of staff in the Pentagon, on the Hill, and across the Intelligence Community! We're onto something here.

Whoever said "the best engineering is the result of vigorous debate" hasn't seen the results when all these staffs enter the ring. Whether buying "commercial" imagery or national capabilities, no decision should ever be made quickly or without running the gauntlet of committees and studies. In fact, several

years ago the country began contemplating what should be built to replace our aging imagery satellites. Despite concerns about the fragility of the constellation, the fact that threats to our nation were neither going away nor getting easier, that the demands on the systems were continuing to grow, and that fierce competition for limited funding was leaving very few options, those few options were studied for years.

An eventual decision to essentially make no changes — which by the way had to go to the President of the United States for a final decision — is now giving way to spending a couple more years to slowly work through the design before finally beginning production (Thank goodness we aren't going to do anything new or more complicated.).

Help will ensure that this program does not move too quickly. I heard that the sneaky people at the NRO were considering new satellite designs that might offer some future flexibility. Thankfully the crack staffers were onto it, the DNI was alerted, and a stop was put to it. On another helpful matter, the NRO was asked to perform a study — to determine what engineering designs could be considered to make certain that the satellites wouldn't last too long. Now that's real Washington ingenuity.

Sadly, this drama continues. Leadership has a responsibility to ensure that our citizens have the necessary capabilities to protect our national security. Why then are some in Congress unwilling to move forward? Would you be surprised to learn that some argue that our capabilities are too good, and that in the future the capabilities should be limited to only "good enough," a euphemism for less capable? I would argue that if we weren't "good enough" on September 11, we shouldn't aim to be less capable.

Has the NRO "lost the recipe"? The current approach to how the NRO is managed assumes, apparently, that the NRO is no longer able to design the satellites, manage the risk, and make good decisions. I believe that rather than the NRO losing the recipe, the ingredients have been taken away: a dedicated workforce assigned to the mission, with control of its resources and the authority to make its own decisions.

With the right approach we can reverse the mantra... "Why does it take us 10 years and billions of dollars to build satellites today?" The good people at the NRO understand how we got here, and more importantly, they are performing well despite all the Help. But I believe they could do better.

The commitment has to come from the top — a deliberate choice to restore the NRO's ability to perform its job by providing the best people with more appropriate-length duty assignments, holding them accountable for the success of mission, and appropriately resourcing them. Is overhead reconnaissance important enough today for the SecDef, DNI, and National Security Advisor to convince the President to once again treat it as special, give it the best people, sufficient resources, and strong authority to ensure the U.S. maintains its leadership position? Or is overhead reconnaissance just another national security capability that competes in the land of mediocrity and reduces our position to just "good enough"?

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