

2004

Secret Empire: Eisenhower, the CIA and the Hidden Story of America's Space Espionage,

Frank C. Mahncke

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Mahncke, Frank C. (2004) "Secret Empire: Eisenhower, the CIA and the Hidden Story of America's Space Espionage," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 57 : No. 1 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol57/iss1/29>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

speed, and lethality. Hackworth and England are unsparing in their depictions of the martinets and incompetents who made up a fair portion of the officer and noncommissioned officers' corps that led soldiers into the Delta swamps and rice paddies—beginning with the battalion commander who places his unit's main base in the middle of a Viet Cong minefield, through a commanding general more focused on maximizing body counts for his own career than on effectively fighting an elusive enemy.

Despite determined opposition both from the enemy and higher headquarters, Hackworth achieved an organizational transformation of his hard-luck battalion. The 4/39th became a skilled, deadly foe of the Viet Cong in the Delta, a unit that took the fight to the enemy, taking away his initiative. Hackworth did this through reimposition of a strict but fair discipline, introduction of and training in proven and successful fieldcraft, and leadership from the front. There are no magic bullets or technological fixes for this kind of transformation, just simple success on the battlefield—the enemy dies or goes away. In the beginning of his command, Hackworth's disciplinarian approach earned him a contract on his head from his own soldiers. By the time he left, one of these same soldiers would write, "The most terrible thing happened today. Colonel Hackworth left. You remember the one everyone hated, and wanted shot? Now there's another bounty out for him—to anyone who can get him back."

Steel My Soldiers' Hearts contains the collected practical wisdom of this successful battalion commander. Curiously, however, the wisdom that keeps

soldiers alive on the battlefield does not necessarily contribute to the end of battles or wars. Hackworth and England acknowledge as much in an account of a conversation between Hackworth and John Paul Vann. Hackworth and Vann were compatriots and friends; Vann had been Hackworth's company commander in Korea. Vann, now a civilian advisor to the South Vietnamese regime, told Hackworth that while his battalion was improving the security of the area, they were killing too many civilians. Vann added, "Once the 9th's out of here, I reckon that eighty to ninety percent of the Delta's population will come to our side. You guys have been the VC's biggest recruiter. You kill a boy's mama, which side do you reckon he'll join?"

Therein lies the major lesson of this frank, valuable book. A nation's armed forces can be exceptionally well trained, exceptionally lethal, and full of esprit de corps. They can win all the battles. They can maximize the body count. But if the end of the battle or war is flawed—or worse, uncertain—no amount of courage, steel, or personal battlefield leadership will have obtained victory.

JON CZARNECKI
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, California



Taubman, Philip. *Secret Empire: Eisenhower, the CIA and the Hidden Story of America's Space Espionage*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. 441pp. \$27

That the United States has conducted a program of high-altitude and spaceborne photographic reconnaissance since the mid-1950s is hardly a secret.

With the public release of many previously classified source documents and project histories, the time is right for Philip Taubman's history of the strategic issues, politics, personalities, and technologies that drove the development of America's extraordinary space reconnaissance capability.

Taubman has reported on national security and intelligence matters for the *New York Times* for more than twenty years. He is clearly a thorough researcher; his list of consulted sources, documents, and technical reports runs to eighteen pages of small print. Much of it is material new to the public domain.

Strange as it may seem today, when the United States is rich in strategic intelligence, in the early 1950s it had no reliable estimate of the numbers of strategic bombers, missiles, or nuclear warheads in the Soviet Union. As Winston Churchill said, the USSR was "a riddle wrapped in an enigma." Bison bombers flew circles around Moscow to inflate the estimates of Western air attachés of their numbers; Nikita Khrushchev rattled rockets to add to the noise.

In this murky but threatening environment, the Eisenhower administration was struggling to develop a balanced defense policy, one that would offer effective defense against an opponent whose capabilities and intentions were imperfectly known, but one that would not break the nation's economy. Hard strategic intelligence—reconnaissance-based counts of strategic things—was key. However, the Soviet Union was then what was picturesquely called "a denied area." RB-47s and similar aircraft probed the borders but could not see deeply into the Soviet Union, and their reconnaissance flights often ended

in political embarrassment for the government and tragedy for the crews.

At this point, a collection of remarkable men entered the game: Edwin Land of Polaroid, a politically well connected systems engineer; Kelly Johnson, head of Lockheed's fabled "Skunk Works" and builder of extraordinary aircraft; James Baker of Harvard, a most creative camera-system designer; and Arthur Lundhal of the CIA, a gifted photographic interpreter. Richard Bissell, the CIA's legendary manager of high-risk projects, assumed the leadership of this gang and with it brought the fabled U-2 high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft and later the first photographic reconnaissance satellites, Corona, to operational fulfillment.

Taubman paints these men unreservedly as patriots, putting their considerable technical skills and imagination at their country's service. That they were. More importantly, they grasped the need for hard strategic intelligence and had the perspective to see the promise of new technologies and their application to the problem of strategic reconnaissance.

The author does a splendid job of interpreting the significance of the technical problems encountered and the brilliant ingenuity of the solutions. Aircraft had never operated at the combination of altitude (over seventy thousand feet) and range (beyond three thousand miles) that strategic overflight of the Soviet Union would require. The solution from Johnson's Skunk Works was the U-2, a sort of jet-powered glider with the climb characteristics of a homesick angel. Baker designed cameras with long focal lengths that folded into tight fuselage and satellite spaces; Kodak developed films that could

survive the temperature extremes encountered at reconnaissance altitudes; Lundhal organized a photographic interpretation activity to receive and analyze the pictures.

When satellite-borne cameras replaced the U-2, new and even more demanding technical problems arose. Just getting a satellite launched and into orbit was no mean trick. Choosing between relaying television pictures from space or returning exposed film was a subtle and demanding technical choice. Recovery of the exposed film was selected and became the coolest trick of all: film capsules, ejected from the satellite, re-entered the atmosphere and parachuted down to where a specially equipped C-130 snagged them out of the air.

All this seems quite ordinary today, but in the 1950s these were innovative technical accomplishments. Too often strategic histories treat critical technical accomplishments lightly and gloss over their significance to strategic and policy choices. To Taubman's credit, he is attuned to the importance of the enabling technologies and brings their role and impact to the reader's understanding.

After getting the cameras aloft, Taubman turns his attention to the consequences of the pictures they returned. The first flights captured staggering numbers of detailed pictures covering vast sweeps of the hidden interior of the Soviet Union. The pictures revealed that Soviet Bison bombers were as rare as the animal is today in Montana and that Soviet intercontinental missiles, while large and ugly, were few and in a low state of readiness.

This did not end the Cold War or put America completely at ease, but it did bring some balance and scope to

defense planning for the late 1950s. In 1960 a presidential candidate who should be remembered for better things rode to victory partly on claims that the Eisenhower administration had allowed a dangerous missile gap to grow. The pictures from these satellites and aircraft put paid to that.

Taubman's book is twice valuable—first, for its historical development of the value and impact of strategic intelligence, and second, for its insight into the role of technology and technologists in shaping strategic policy.

In his final pages, Taubman raises important questions about America's current reliance on technical intelligence collection methods. He notes that little about al-Qa'ida's activities or capabilities is being revealed or forecast by satellite reconnaissance and that human intelligence sources and the collection of intelligence must play a central role in the twenty-first-century war against terrorism.

FRANK C. MAHNCKE
Edgartown, Massachusetts



Bonds, John Bledsoe. *Bipartisan Strategy: Selling the Marshall Plan*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002. 256pp. \$64.95

When we look back on great historical events, we often ascribe an inevitability to things that were, in fact, anything but. In this lucid and comprehensive study of the formulation and enactment of the Marshall Plan, John Bonds recounts how this great pillar of American post-World War II policy was anything but inevitable. Bonds, a retired captain of the U.S. Navy and professor of history at the Citadel in Charlestown, South Carolina,