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Our New Jet Spy: 'Most Advanced'

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WASHINGTON

The United States will soon have a new, long-range reconnaissance aircraft capable of "world-wide" operations, President Johnson revealed yesterday.

He said at his press conference that the SR-71 (Strategic Reconnaissance) would be "the most advanced in the world."

While the President divulged few details of the plane's performance and nothing at all about its appearance, it was learned that the craft was developed in the now-famous "skunk works" at the Lockheed Aircraft Corp. facilities in Burbank, Calif. That was where Clarence L. (Kelly) Johnson hatched the U-2 and the A-11.

It was understood that the SR-71 is an outgrowth of the A-11, announced in February and now being tested as an interceptor. The President

noted that both planes use the J-58 Pratt & Whitney engine—as do later models of the U-2 spy plane. There was considerable speculation, after President Johnson's disclosure, that the SR-71 was assuming the reconnaissance mission for which the A-11 was originally conceived.

For reasons that have not been explained yet, the A-11's primary mission was changed to that of an interceptor. One possible explanation is size. Comparing the two planes,

President Johnson said: The SR-71 "is substantially heavier and it has a longer range. The considerably heavier gross weight permits it to accommodate the multiple reconnaissance sensors needed by the Strategic Air Command to accomplish their mission in a military environment."

He said the SR-71 program—a tightly-guarded secret as was the A-11 development—was begun in February, 1963. This marks the SR-71 as a product of the Democratic administration. Sen. Barry Goldwater, the Republican Presidential candidate, has attacked the Administration for allegedly initiating new weapons systems and for short-changing the future of manned aircraft in favor of missiles. President Johnson stressed that the SR-71 would be a "new, strategic, manned aircraft system."

Thus, the President's announcement, apparently calculated to attract maximum attention, had certain political overtones. Although the SR-71 is not designed primarily as a strike plane, it could be armed, Pentagon sources said.

President Johnson personally announced development of the A-11 on Feb. 29, and also used a scheduled press conference to give out the news. At that time he said the disclosure was being made to "permit the orderly exploitation of this advanced technology in our military and commercial programs." Yesterday he gave no specific reason for letting the world in on the secret.

The SR-71 will be test flown early next year, the President said, and deployment of operational models to SAC will begin "shortly thereafter." He said the speed would be "more than three times the speed of sound" (Mach-3, or somewhat better than 2,000 miles an hour), and placed the operational altitude at above 80,000 feet.

While he gave no figure for range, it was assumed the operating radius will be at least twice that of the U-2, which is estimated at 2,600 miles. The U-2's speed is under 500 miles an hour.

"The system," President Johnson said, "will be used during periods of military hostilities and in other situations in which United States military forces may be confronting foreign military forces."

This appeared to be a reaffirmation of current policy not to overfly the Soviet Union. Former President Eisenhower said in 1960 the flights would cease. This followed the downing of Francis Gary Powers' U-2 over the Soviet Union.

However, the phrase about American forces "confronting foreign military forces" indicated the new plane would be used in places like Southeast Asia and Cuba. U-2's are known to have performed reconnaissance missions in both of these areas.

In the case of Cuba, the SR-71 could meet a very

specific need. The Castro regime has been threatening to shoot down American reconnaissance planes when and if it gets full control over the Russian anti-aircraft missiles now in Cuba (one U-2 was shot down early in the American reconnaissance effort).

The United States is determined to continue surveillance over Cuba, but it hopes to avoid shooting.

The speed and altitude of the SR-71 make it far less vulnerable than the U-2 to anti-aircraft fire. President Johnson's reference to the new plane's size would indicate that the performance of its photographic and electronic eyes would exceed that of any existing plane.

The President mentioned "multiple sensors needed by the Strategic Air Command" to accomplish their mission. A principal SAC mission is to destroy the enemy's strategic nuclear weapons in the event of war.

It would appear, then, that the SR-71 fills a gap between the now-vulnerable U-2 and the reconnaissance satellites in operation. The satellites are safe from known means of interception. However, the quality of satellite photography has not been as good as intelligence officials would like.