

# Intelligence in Public Media

## **A Brotherhood of Spies: The U-2 and the CIA Secret War**

Monte Reel (Doubleday, 2018), 342 pp., illustrations, endnotes, bibliography, and index

### ***Reviewed by Clayton Laurie***

History provides us the ability to keep the present in perspective. It is useful today to recall a time decades ago, during the height of the Cold War, when Americans faced a true existential threat from a nuclear-armed Soviet Union. On 29 August 1949, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb (roughly the same 25 kt. size as that dropped on Hiroshima) and four years later, on 12 August 1953, exploded a 400 kt. hydrogen bomb. While disconcerting to the American public and those in President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration, the Russians still lacked the means to deliver a surprise nuclear attack upon the United States. That changed the following year, however, when US officials in Moscow noted during the 1954 May Day parade the appearance of a new, long-range Soviet jet bomber, the Mya-4 Bison, an aircraft ostensibly capable of reaching the United States. The fear that a "bomber gap" now existed with the Soviets— possessing an unknown number of Mya-4s, and with the new US B-52 bomber still coming off assembly lines—threw the nation into near panic. Even worse, the CIA could not apprise President Eisenhower of the true nature and extent of the threat due to its inability to penetrate the communist world with spies. The president needed accurate knowledge to carry out the primary functions of his office—to protect the nation and reduce uncertainty. He also needed an assessment of the nation's ability to answer these vital intelligence questions.

How the CIA and private sectors responded is the subject of Monte Reel's fast-paced and very enjoyable book, *A Brotherhood of Spies: The U-2 and the CIA Secret War*. Reel, author of two other books on historical topics, has written for the *New Yorker*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, and the *Washington Post*, where he served as a foreign correspondent. He currently writes for *Bloomberg Businessweek*. The author covers the already well-known story of the U-2 program, but from a different and novel approach through interlocking biographical accounts of four participants: inventor, entrepreneur, and intelligence consultant Dr. Edwin H. Land; Lockheed aviation engineer Clarence L. "Kelly" Johnson; CIA U-2 program director Dr. Richard M. Bissell, Jr.; and U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers. Referring to the four as a brotherhood of spies, however, is a writer's contrivance that implies a much closer relationship than existed among them. They were integral to the program, true, but they were also not alone and were not in constant four-way contact. Each played much different roles in different places, and each made contributions of varying but not equivalent importance. More than 300 people knew of the covert CIA U-2 program when Powers was shot down on 1 May 1960, and hundreds more—unwitting of its true purpose or origins—built, serviced, and maintained the aircraft and examined the imagery collected. Although touted as such, this is not a story that suits the "great man in history" concept, and the book provides little new information.

The author has consulted the vast literature on the U-2 that has accrued over the past 50-plus

years, including declassified CIA publications and archival sources at the Eisenhower Presidential Library and the National Archives. The selected bibliography is thorough, listing the standard histories and memoirs, and the endnotes are adequate, citing many additional contemporary journal and newspaper accounts, government hearings, and interviews. Historians always hope that when journalists, novelists, or non-fiction writers choose historical topics, they analyze such sources carefully and stay true to events. Many, however, tend not to let chronologies or the written factual record interfere with the telling of an exciting, larger-than-life story that will appeal to a popular audience. While Reel covers the overall program well, the book has too many inaccuracies and overgeneralizations to recommend it as a stand-alone introduction to U-2 history. Careful attention to, and placement of, people, places, dates, events and causes and effects is not pedantry but an essential ingredient for accurate history.

Although the book's shortcomings are too many to cite here, a few examples will suffice to illustrate the problem:

- The Technical Capabilities Panel (TCP), whose intelligence subcommittee Land chaired, accurately assessed the weaknesses of CIA HUMINT collection in the Soviet Union and recommended space-based reconnaissance systems as the solution. CIA contracted with Lockheed to build the U-2 the same month the TCP began its work in November 1954. Land did not deliver his report to Eisenhower until early 1955, by which time the U-2 was a done deal, and the TCP report contained no mention of it.
- Air Force General Curtis Lemay dismissed Kelly Johnson and his CL-282 (later, the U-2) design according to myth and legend because it lacked armament or because he and Johnson disliked each other. But perhaps most important, the Air Force already had a top-secret contract with Bell Aircraft to build 20 X-16 reconnaissance aircraft, a design very similar to Johnson's U-2. Few beyond Lemay knew of the classified program, and Johnson had no need to know. Yet, soon after the CIA signed the U-2 contract with Lockheed, the Air Force cancelled the X-16, knowing the CIA would share U-2 collection if not eventually the aircraft itself.
- The National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) came into being through a CIA and DoD agreement on 6 September 1961, not September 1960, after the first successful Corona photoreconnaissance satellite mission the previous month.
- The CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology, with responsibility for oversight and development of CIA aerial and space-based collection platforms appeared in August 1963—long after Land, Bissell, and Powers had left the scene. Its predecessor, the feckless Deputy Directorate of Research, created by new DCI John McCone in February 1962, met fierce opposition from Bissell, who vehemently declined any involvement and who, in any event, left to become the first co-director of the NRO. He left government service altogether in April 1962.
- President Kennedy fired DCI Allen Dulles—and made clear that Bissell's days were numbered as well—in November 1961 after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion; Dulles did not simply retire.
- Joe Murphy, who met and identified Gary Powers on the Glienicke Bridge in Berlin during his exchange for KGB spy Rudolf Abel, was a CIA security officer and not a U-2 pilot.
- Johnson and Lockheed did produce the SR-71 Blackbird, after building the CIA's A-12 Oxcart, a different and superior-performing supersonic reconnaissance aircraft that many today erroneously conflate.

Beyond such errors, Reel often includes superfluous episodes with little connection to the main history. Kelly Johnson's professional relationship with aviator Amelia Earhart before her final flight, while interesting, has nothing to do with the U-2, Land, Bissell, Powers, or CIA. The

extensive coverage of the Bay of Pigs episode, Barbara Powers's conjugal visits with her husband in Soviet detention, Joseph Alsop's Moscow honey trap problems, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Georgetown Set parties, and assassination plots against Castro, including Mafia involvement, clutter and distract from the narrative.

Reel's book is nonetheless an enjoyable read. Taken with other more scholarly accounts, with CIA's declassified publications on the U-2 program highly recommended as a start, *A Brotherhood of Spies* makes for a breezy, interesting, and enjoyable supplemental look at one of the nation's most revolutionary intelligence collection platforms and those colorful individuals involved in its development and use.

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**The reviewer:** Clayton Laurie is a former military and CIA historian.

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