

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

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Philip Taubman. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2003. 441 pages.

Reviewed by David S. Robarge

The CIA's first Deputy Director of Science and Technology (DDS&T), Albert Wheelon, recalled that after overhead reconnaissance systems were deployed against the Soviet Union, "it was as if an enormous floodlight had been turned on in a darkened warehouse."¹ Much the same might be said of all the books, articles, document collections, and videos about the aerial and satellite reconnaissance programs published commercially and officially during the past decade. The full story of the impact that America's "spies in the skies" had on US policy toward the Soviet Union may cause as significant a reinterpretation of Cold War history as disclosures about the ULTRA code-breaking operation did for the history of World War II. It also will enrich the debate over the relative influence of human agents versus what would later be called "national technical means" in the superpowers' battle for global dominance, and will inform discussions about how best to employ intelligence assets in the war against terrorism.

With *Secret Empire*, Philip Taubman--an editor at the New York Times and

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formerly one of its national security reporters--has filled the "if you read only one book on the subject, this is it" category. *Secret Empire* is an accessible, thorough (but not definitive) synthesis for the general reader. By focusing on a remarkable cohort of technical espionage pioneers, Taubman adds the human interest needed to enliven the bureaucratic and technological emphases of many others works on this topic. Also, telling the U-2 and CORONA stories side by side helps us appreciate the two programs' interrelationship--an important aspect that is lost when separate works on each are consulted.

Like any good journalistic history, *Secret Empire* is full of interesting anecdotes, some familiar, some offbeat:

- The U-2's special fuel required many petroleum by-products, some of them used in a popular insecticide called Flit. As more of those substances was diverted for U-2 fuel production in 1955, cans of Flit disappeared in many places.
- To conceal the camera port on the CORONA capsule, Lockheed engineers designed a paper cover with piano strings and Ping-Pong balls attached. Air turbulence created during lift-off was supposed to push on the balls enough to pull off the paper sheet. To test the contraption, an engineer put it on his sports car's windshield and zoomed down a local freeway at 90 mph. A policeman pulled him over for speeding. "CORONA records do not indicate what explanation [the engineer] gave for the paper and Ping-Pong balls." The idea never worked, and the port was left exposed.
- The primary alloy for the A-12 OXCART, titanium, was so scarce that the CIA had to import some covertly from the Soviet Union.²

Driving all the techno-innovation are numerous figures in politics, science, the military, intelligence, and defense contracting: Dwight Eisenhower, James Killian, Edwin Land, Richard Bissell, Richard Leghorn, James Baker, Bernard Schriever, Kelly Johnson, and James Plummer, to name but some. Taubman's sketches of them are lucid and insightful without too much drama or psychology (although sometimes too much biographical detail). The profound influence that a small group of brilliant practitioners of arcane disciplines had on national security policy then, bespeaks what now seems an almost naive faith in science on the part of US leaders.

Taubman rightly stresses Eisenhower's indispensable role in pushing the development of the aerial and satellite-based reconnaissance systems. Ike's World War II experience showed him how crucial intelligence was on the battlefield, and he worried that Cold War tensions might turn America

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into a garrison state. "Without intelligence," he said soon after becoming president, "you would only have your fears on which to plan your own defense arrangements and your whole military establishment. Now if you're going to use nothing but fear and that's all you have, you are going to make us an armed camp. So this kind of knowledge is vital to us."³ His patience and fortitude inspired the wizards at Lockheed and Langley to persevere through the failure-ridden early stages of CORONA.

Taubman's portrayal of Richard Bissell is less flattering than that of most historians. The founding father of CIA TECHINT looks less like the brilliant Marshall Plan administrator who later got the U-2 up on time and under budget, and more like a stubborn "intellocrat" whose commitment to projects blinded him to their flaws. Taubman errs in his discussion of the formation of the DS&T and the controversy between the CIA and the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) over control of the early imagery satellites. His narrative is too DS&T-centric, slights the role of Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) John McCone, and gives little credence to the military's viewpoint.

What did Taubman's cast of characters accomplish? Their technical achievements were impressive enough, but most important was the psychological relief that their overhead systems gave to policymakers. The "bomber gap" and the "missile gap" disappeared, and American leaders no longer had to err on the side of survival by thinking "worst case." "Tonight we know how many missiles the enemy had," President Lyndon Johnson declared in 1967, "and, it turned out, our guesses were way off. We were doing things we didn't need to do. We were building things we didn't need to build. We were harboring fears we didn't need to harbor."⁴ The U-2 and the satellites (especially the latter, after both sides had them) largely allayed fears of a surprise attack and permitted diplomacy and arms control to move ahead.

Taubman applies his history to the present in an admonitory epilogue stressing the well-known (but worth repeating) limitations of TECHINT systems as counterterrorism tools. The idea, as former DCI Stansfield Turner put it, that "what you do with a human agent today is to fill the gaps in what you cannot obtain by technical devices"⁵ has been durable because it is appealingly simple. The gaps in coverage of post-Cold War targets have proven to be larger than expected, however, and the United States' technology-heavy intelligence services have been slow to respond to the new environment. Taubman notes:

Until September 11, 2001, American spy agencies were still largely creatures of the Cold War, designed to collect intelligence about static espionage targets...and easily identifiable military activities...[b]ut the spy machinery of the Cold War--and the lumbering government institutions that were built to operate and maintain it--are not well matched to the task of gathering intelligence about terrorist groups...Terrorists are everything Soviet military forces were not: invisible, elusive, improvisational, and cunningly creative. Spy satellites can provide pictures of their training camps and intercept their communications...but satellites cannot supply the kind of round-the-clock surveillance that is required to detect unfolding plots, and they offer no help in recruiting sources inside terror cells.⁶

The World Trade Center attacks evoked urgent calls from Congress and intelligence professionals for more spies, yet when Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered the US indictment against Iraq--in many ways a traditional, Soviet-like adversary--to the United Nations, he front-loaded his presentation with TECHINT, indicating that policymakers regard it as the most definitive and persuasive information. Taubman suggests that the proposed Future Imagery Architecture system of reconnaissance satellites--the "lean and mean" overhead counterpart to rapid-deployment forces--may be a solution, but that program reportedly is beset with major technical and budgetary problems, including in systems designed to target terrorists.⁷ Those, and other difficulties that the NRO and the National Security Agency are experiencing, may impair the Intelligence Community's ability to provide political leaders and warfighters with the pictures and intercepts they regard as the best evidence of what our enemies are up to.

For many decades, the United States has had lots of money and brains to throw at problems, which has infatuated us with the technological fix. What our leaders--driven by foreign crises and domestic politics--have not had is the time and patience essential to developing many successful agent operations against hard targets. As recent revelations about the clandestine side of the war against Iraq have shown, the Intelligence Community has depended too heavily on defectors and second-hand sources of undetermined reliability. *Secret Empires* helps us better understand how our achievements at TECHINT and our shortcomings at HUMINT came to pass during the Cold War, and suggests some cautionary historical lessons as we move into an era of homeland defense and international counterterrorism against unfamiliar, amorphous adversaries.

Footnotes

1. Taubman, p. 35.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 167, 265-66, 340.

3. Quoted in Larry Tart, *The Price of Vigilance: Attacks on American Surveillance Flights* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2002), p. 119.
4. Quoted in Taubman, pp. 28, 327.
5. Quoted on "Spy Machines," CI-TV episode #103, available from CIC's Counterintelligence & Security Program.
6. Taubman, p. 361.
7. Douglas Pasternak, "Lack of Intelligence," *US News and World Report*, Vol. 135, No. 4 (11 August 2003), pp. 35-43.

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