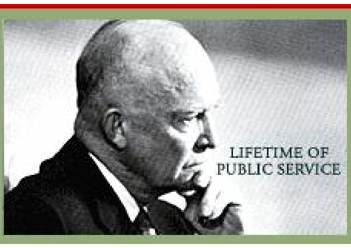
DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER MEMORIAL COMMISSION

*It's time to build a national memorial to Dwight D.Eisenhower.*



Eisenhower Stories

# The U-2 Incident

In the aftermath of World War II, the Soviet Union developed both atomic weapons and airplanes and then the missiles capable of delivering them any place in the world. President Eisenhower's policies for waging the Cold War against communism were all framed with this fundamental threat in mind. Ike's challenge was to contain the authoritarian communist states without causing another war, weakening the U.S. economy, or destroying the civil liberties essential to American democracy.

U-2 In Flight

To do so, the President had to know as much as possible about the Soviet intent and the weapons it was deploying. Eisenhower's worst fear was that some Soviet leader, faced with the paralyzing costs of an arms race, would decide to destroy the source with a pre-emptive nuclear strike. What America needed was a means of detecting the enemy's specific intentions and military deployments.

On March 27, 1954 the President asked James Killian, president of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to chair a secret commission of scientists to explore new intelligence weapons to guard America against a sneak attack. Killian's first selection for service on the commission was Edwin Land, president of the Polaroid Corporation, who held 164 scientific patents for a wide variety of imaging devices. The commission, with the self-appointed name Technological Capabilities Panel, soon determined that the ultimate answer laid in the development of camera-laden reconnaissance satellites. But the development of such devices was at least five years in the future.

President Eisenhower knew he couldn't leave America exposed for five years while waiting on the satellites. He and Killian decided that the best solution would be to build a spy plane. They turned for help to Robert Amory, the CIA's chief of intelligence. Amory had been trying for four years to have an intelligence aircraft developed that could fly above 70,000 feet and take pictures of the Soviet Union. He knew that no Soviet ground-to-air missiles or aircraft could fly that high, but so far, Amory had been unsuccessful in his efforts.

Now that he had the support he needed, he visited Kelly Johnson and the Lockheed engineers who worked in a secret “skunk works” facility in California. Johnson told Armory they had already designed such a plane, but the Air Force had rejected it. He showed the design drawings to Armory. Basically, the airplane was a large glider with long sailplane wings and a jet engine with just enough thrust to get it above 70,000 feet and keep it there. Armory told Killian that the plane could do the job.

By August, 1955, Lockheed had the U-2 ready to fly. By November, the unwieldy looking airplane had broken the world’s altitude record (65,889 feet), and by the spring of 1956 it was ready to be deployed to secret airfields scattered around the borders of the Soviet empire.

President Eisenhower reserved to himself the authorization for U-2 flights over Soviet territory. He was assured by his intelligence advisors that no radar or missile in the USSR could reach the aircraft above 70,000 feet. Nevertheless, there was an obvious risk in flying over Soviet territory. With that in mind, Eisenhower offered the Soviets a plan, “Open Skies,” whereby the two nations would have mutual aerial inspection rights. Soviet aircraft could, the Plan said, fly over the United States for reconnaissance purposes and American aircraft could do likewise in Soviet airspace. But after Khrushchev publicly rejected this proposal, Eisenhower authorized the first U-2 mission.

The first flights in July, 1956 were spectacular successes. Soviet radar reached much higher than American intelligence projected, so the U-2’s were tracked during every minute of operation over the USSR. As a result, Soviet interceptor aircraft attempted to attack the intruders but they couldn’t gain enough altitude. Khrushchev immediately protested the intrusions, but he faced two problems: he couldn’t prove that the airplanes belonged to the United States and he wouldn’t admit that his planes and missiles were unable to shoot down the intruders. The intelligence gained by Edwin Land’s cameras was so spectacular that the CIA and Air Force put continuous pressure on the White House to authorize more flights.

Eisenhower had reasons to be cautious, however. He hoped that in the summit meeting scheduled for the spring of 1960, the United States, the Soviet Union, France, and Great Britain would agree to ban atmospheric testing of nuclear bombs, and he didn’t want a U-2 crisis to interfere with the summit. Meanwhile, he and his Administration were under attack in that election year for allowing a “missile gap” to develop between the USSR and the United States. As a result of the overflights, Ike knew that wasn’t true, but he – like Khrushchev – couldn’t say anything in public. In was, in brief, a tense situation.

If Eisenhower had been fully informed about the progress the Soviets were making with their ground-to-air missiles, he would have been even more concerned.

By 1960 the Soviets had developed SAM missiles that could reach above 65,000 feet. Their accuracy was not good, however, so the CIA decided that the risk of a SAM actually hitting the U-2 was minimal. Still, there was a new possibility that a U-2 could actually be shot down. Ominously no one informed either President Eisenhower or his top military aide, General Andrew Goodpaster, of this new danger.

As the months crept past, Ike's national security advisors and military commanders continued to urge the President to authorize a few more U-2 flights. The CIA and military intelligence knew that the Soviets were about to deploy their first generation of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's) and the Americans wanted U-2 pictures of the facilities and missiles before they were installed underground or camouflaged. Eisenhower, who appreciated the importance of this information, finally approved two more U-2 flights for the month of April. On April 9, 1960 the first flight was successful and no protests were heard from Moscow. Weather problems delayed the second flight until May 1, when the CIA launched the plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers from a secret base in Peshawar, Pakistan.

Khruhchev displays wreckage of the U-2 spy plane shot down over the USSR.

The next day Khrushchev announced that an American spy plane had been shot down over Sverdlovsk in central Russia. Washington immediately issued a press release denying that the plane was spying and claiming that the pilot of a U-2 weather plane suffered oxygen problems, became unconscious, and inadvertently flew into Soviet air space on autopilot. Two days later Khrushchev announced that the pilot had been captured alive, and the Kremlin displayed parts of the plane, the cameras, and Powers' flight suit to the international press.

At this point, Eisenhower decided that no more lies would be published over his name. The President confirmed that he had ordered the U-2 flights over a three-year period in order to protect the United States from a surprise attack. A few days later, Khrushchev used the opening session of the summit meeting in Paris to demand that Eisenhower personally apologize for the overflights and agree to a list of other Soviet demands. The President refused to apologize for defending his country and the meeting ended at its opening.

Eisenhower was discouraged because the hoped-for nuclear test ban treaty crashed along with the U-2. But the American press and the American people applauded Eisenhower's reasoned decision to seek the information that would help protect the nation's security in the dangerous years of the nuclear age. What decision would you have made if you had been President of the United States?

Suggested reading: Beschloss, Michael R., *MAYDAY: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1986.

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