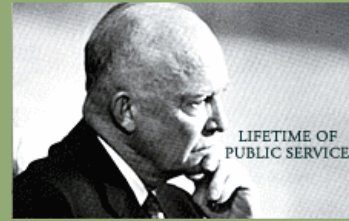


DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER MEMORIAL COMMISSION

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



Eisenhower Stories

Ike and the Sputnik Crisis

Like other public servants, Eisenhower could not always tell the American people what they wanted to hear, nor could he always explain why he was making the decisions that were coming out of the White House. That was certainly the case after the Soviet Union successfully launched the world's first orbiting satellite. In the weeks that followed, President Eisenhower endured harsh public criticism to achieve a national security objective that he could not reveal to anyone.

During his eight years as President of the United States, Eisenhower developed a series of new national security policies. His first responsibility was to defend the nation against the accelerating weapons technology that might lead the world to nuclear war. He was the first president to face the potential horror of a war involving intercontinental ballistic missiles tipped with nuclear warheads. Determined to keep informed on the latest developments in science and technology, he created several White House scientific advisory committees and boards to study these issues. The more he learned, the more convinced he became that the only way to win a nuclear war was to prevent it.

As a military man, Ike knew from experience that being well equipped to win a war was not enough. You also had to know what the enemy was up to in order to prevent a surprise attack. The president understood that as America's strategy shifted from the use of long-range bombers carrying nuclear weapons to the use of intercontinental missiles that could reach their targets in minutes, the need for timely knowledge of enemy preparations became urgent.

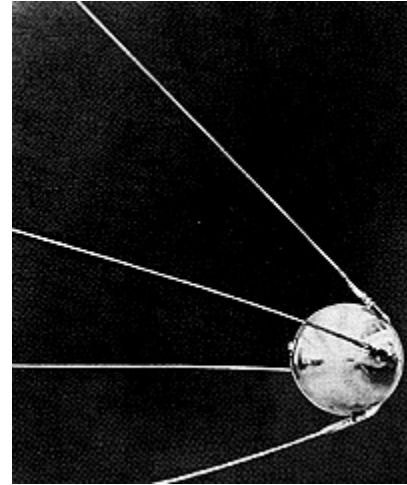
In the early 1950s our aerial reconnaissance consisted of propeller-driven airplanes. These aircraft flew along the borders of the USSR, sometimes intruding into Soviet airspace in order to photograph military installations. Flying over a nation's sovereign territory without its permission was considered an act of war. Indeed, the Soviets shot down several American airplanes while on these missions.

Believing that the world would be safer if the Soviets and Americans could freely view each other's territories, Eisenhower publicly called for an "open skies" policy in 1955. But the Soviets quickly rejected the idea. At that time the United States was finishing the development of the U-2, a jet-propelled spy plane which could fly over the USSR at altitudes beyond the ability of Soviet anti-aircraft missiles to shoot it down. But Eisenhower knew that it was only a matter of time before the Russians developed an effective counter-measure.

Meanwhile, both sides were secretly developing technologies to launch satellites to orbit the earth. Ike knew that in time these satellites would be equipped to carry powerful cameras, and he hoped that neither side would take the next obvious step, which would be to figure out how to demolish each other's satellites in space.

In the meantime, however, there was a chance that American satellites flying over Russia could be seen as an act of war. Somehow, he had to find a way to establish that a nation's sovereignty rose no higher than the earth's atmosphere.

This issue became crucial in 1956 when the CIA informed President Eisenhower that the Soviets were likely to launch a satellite within a year. The military establishment began urging Ike to let them launch a satellite first by using one of their ballistic missiles. Ike rejected these suggestions. He had already proposed the creation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration because he wanted to emphasize to the world that America's space ventures would be the domain of a peaceful civilian organization and not an arm of the military. He kept his other reasons for the decision to himself.



Soviet Union Satellite: Sputnik

The pressure to show his hand increased sharply on October 4, 1957. After the Soviet Union placed a 184-pound satellite – the famous Sputnik -- 550 miles high in earth orbit, Ike simply congratulated the USSR on its achievement. Eisenhower expected a public outcry due to a perception that the Soviets were technologically ahead of the United States. But he was truly shocked by the massive hysteria, fear, and recriminations that swept through the American populace. He was pilloried in the media for allowing the Russians to “get ahead” of the United States in space. His standing in the polls dropped 22 percent. Ike held press conferences in an effort to calm down the citizenry. He repeatedly stated that the launching of Sputnik did not increase his concern about our national security “by one iota.” As the harmless little satellite passed over American territory, President Eisenhower calmly endured the public clamor that challenged his leadership. He had a much higher goal in mind.

Four months later the United States launched its first satellite, Explorer I. It blasted off from Cape Canaveral, not from a secret military base. But as it circled the earth and passed over the Soviet Union, Moscow could hardly object since Sputnik had passed over Washington hundreds of times — with Eisenhower's public blessing. By letting the Soviets launch the first satellite Eisenhower had forever established that his policy of “open skies” was finally in place — above the earth's atmosphere. He knew that when our reconnaissance satellites were ready to fly, they could pass over the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with impunity.

One wonders how many modern American presidents would endure such widespread and public calumny in order to achieve a major national defense goal that no one would hear or know about in his lifetime.

Suggested readings on this topic and related matters:

Taubman, Philip, *SECRET EMPIRE – Eisenhower, The CIA, and The Hidden Story of America’s Space Espionage*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2003

Dickson, Paul, *SPUTNIK – The Shock of the Century*, Walker Publishing Company, Inc., New York, 2001

Hall, R. Cargill, *The Eisenhower Administration and the Cold War - Framing American Astronautics to Serve National Security*, Prologue, *Quarterly of the National Archives*, Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 1995, page 59 - 72

© *Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission, Washington, DC, 2004*

Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission

1629 K Street, NW Suite 801

Washington DC 20006

Phone: 202.296.0004 Fax: 202.296.6464

<http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org>