

Question of Disclosing

By Robert O. Toth

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The world yawned Oct. 1 when President Carter made the first public admission by the United States that its spy satellites take reconnaissance photographs of other countries. It was 15-year-old news, and most people ignored it.

Since then, however, it has become clear that in confirming the open secret, Carter gave a crucial first pull on the security curtain that long has hidden "warehouse full" of accumulated picture data, as well as other information; from the "black" [Spy] satellites."

And what will now be permitted to emerge from behind the curtain is the subject of fierce argument within the government; as officials seek to balance the proven civilian value of space pictures against the potential military risks in their release.

The outcome of the controversy: which is being considered by a special White House committee: will be significant and controversial, nationally and internationally.

The data would be immediately and immensely beneficial in a variety of nonmilitary fields; ranging from prospecting for oil in the Rockies to building supertanker ports at Pacific Atolls.

Even the worst-quality reconnaissance pictures have almost three times better quality and detail than the best photographs now available from the civilian Landsat program. The spy satellites can distinguish objects as small as 30 meters (100 feet across), instead of the 80-meter minimum for objects "seen" by Landsat.

The best U.S. spy pictures, taken from more than 100 miles above the earth, reportedly can distinguish a "golf ball on a green, license plate

numbers, even soldiers who have not shaved. Soviet capabilities in this area are said to lag behind the United States by five to 10 years.

Internationally, release of space pictures could be a major step toward a global "open skies" system comparable to that proposed in 1955 by President Eisenhower for the Soviet Union and the United States.

Eisenhower's proposal got nowhere, but increasingly sophisticated satellites have since produced de facto open skies between the two superpowers. Extending this situation to all nations has long been a dream of peace campaigners.

Earlier this year, moreover, the French government proposed that Soviet and American reconnaissance satellites be placed at the disposal of a U.N. agency to monitor several international arms agreements.

But, depending on the quality, date and subject of the photographs to be made public unilaterally by the United States, a number of questions arise that specialists feel must be examined in detail:

- Would the picture data expose weaknesses in U.S. reconnaissance systems that the Soviets or others could exploit and thereby better hide their secret projects?

- Might tensions between small countries be increased if U.S. pictures were misinterpreted and "military buildups" were found? What would U.S. responsibilities then be?

"Developing nations want high-resolution pictures of their countries, but they only want published those that show their natural geological features, not military installations," complained one expert. "In pictures of neighboring countries, they want the reverse

Soviet Sensitivities Weighed

Spy Satellite Photos

— military, not economic, information.”

• Might tensions between smaller nations and the United States result if space pictures showed mineral deposits in areas that U.S. firms have options to develop, particularly if the options were granted after the pictures were taken but before the smaller country saw them?

• How would Moscow react to published U.S. photos pinpointing Soviet airfields, tank concentrations or artillery emplacements along the Chinese border? Or to pictures of Soviet political prison camps that human rights groups use for propaganda?

Soviet sensitivities were a major concern before Carter's Oct. 1 admis-

of the participating agencies in a space policy review could agree for releasing the spy photos. The White House review panel, which began work in March 1977, was asked from the start to take a new look at Eisenhower's "open skies" idea and to seek ways to obtain more civilian benefits from the spy satellites.

The only way to begin, the panel concluded, was to admit publicly that U.S. satellites take pictures.

The Russians were consulted and said they had no objection to Carter's admission of spying by satellite—a response that contrasted sharply with their reaction in 1960 to Eisenhower's U2 admissions. Moscow reportedly predicted, however, that the United

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sion and are likely to continue to be a factor in deciding the next steps to be taken, because satellite overflights are crucial for monitoring arms limitation pacts.

In confirming the spy satellites, administration officials said Carter had prepared the way for using the photographs to show Congress and the public that the United States can independently police any new strategic arms limitation treaty.

“They show we don't have to take the Kremlin's word for anything,” said one official, “now the CIA's, either.”

This was the rationale on which all

States would be opening a Pandora's Box in terms of Third-World countries.

Rep. George E. Brown (D-Calif.), chairman of the House Atmospheric and Environment Subcommittee, believes that only good can come from releasing all space pictures, up to and including the best and the most recent.

“I'm for putting it all out,” he said. “It's a tremendous opportunity for the United States to gain the gratitude of developing nations as well as benefit our civil sector . . .

“We could be on the verge of providing our country and the world with

Stirs Argument

this immensely valuable bank of data," he said. "But I'm skeptical how much will be let out."

One of the first moves to wider circulation of the satellite photos occurred after William E. Colby took office in 1973 as director of central intelligence. In his memoirs, "Honorably Men," Colby says that "we changed the rules so that most satellite photos became more generally available in official circles."

But, Colby adds, he was unable to get the photos declassified, "largely due to the diplomatic objection that other nations would create great difficulties if they were compelled to admit that many of their tightly protected secrets were in fact not secret at all."

One agency not seeking the release of all pictures, for practical as well as security reasons, is the Interior Department.

"The 30-meter resolution pictures in their warehouses would keep us busy for as long as we live," said Gordon Law, science adviser to the secretary of the interior, "and there is a limit below which we really don't have to go in searching for mineral resources or monitoring desertification or policing strip mines."

Civilian companies, particularly some large oil firms, are arguing for release of 10-meter (33 feet) resolution pictures. Their position is reinforced by the offer of both the French government and a European consortium to launch satellites capable of 10-meter resolution for anyone willing to pay the bill.

There are indications that the national security agencies, including the military, might agree to release most of the old 30-meter pictures if some potentially embarrassing to the Rus-

sians were excluded and if there were an agreement that pictures of greater resolution would not subsequently be released.

The Soviets accept as "legal" those U.S. satellite overflights that monitor arms pacts. But those same satellites watch Soviet farm and industrial developments, troop deployments and other activities.

If the United States were to release pictures of objects beyond those covered by arms agreements, some U.S. officials fear that the Russians might insist on a stricter definition on legal overflights, a move that could hamper future U.S. monitoring efforts.

A final objection posed by the national security community to releasing any spy photos is, as one source asked, "where do you stop once you start?"