

Super-Secret Space Spy

Office

Washington

In the secretive world of "overhead" reconnaissance and spy satellite intelligence, the existence of the National Reconnaissance Office has been one of the best kept secrets.

The name of the organization, in fact, is top secret and according to intelligence officials has appeared in public print only once before — by inadvertence.

Yet the office, which is financed primarily through Air Force appropriations, spends an estimated \$1.5 billion a year acquiring and managing the most complex, elusive and expensive force of spies that ever have been recruited into the government's service.

Its customers include the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency and the White House. Its activities are screened off from all but a relative handful of specialists in the national security bureaucracy who carry some of the highest and most specialized clearances issued by the government.

Curiously, the only reference to the National Reconnaissance Office that has been made in a public government document was last October 12 in a report of the special Senate committee to study questions related to secret and confidential government documents. The drafters of the report unwittingly breached security by listing, along with the CIA and other agencies on the concluding page, the National Reconnaissance Office.

Senator William Proxmire (Dem-Wis.) alluded to the office's mission in a recent statement challenging the appointment of Lockheed Aircraft Corporation reconnaissance satellite expert James W. Plummer as undersecretary of the Air Force.

In questioning Plummer's nomination on conflict-of-interest grounds, Proxmire made a pointed observation.

"Normally, the undersecretary of the Air Force has jurisdiction over certain in-

telligence matters and sits on a special committee that directs manned and unmanned overhead reconnaissance including spy satellite programs. These critical projects have run into the billions of dollars - money that flows to defense contractors such as Lockheed."

Plummer has served with Lockheed since 1955. The California-based firm is the principal corporate contractor in the so-called "black" reconnaissance satellite programs carried out by the national reconnaissance office.

In addition to the conflict-of-interest issue in Plummer's appointment, congressional investigators are looking into the possibilities of excess costs in the super-secret reconnaissance satellite program.

"I've never hear of one of these programs that didn't have enormous cost overruns," said one defense Department official who has worked first hand with some of the spy satellite operations. The opportunities for breaking costs and performance commitments are greater in spy satellite programs, this official said, because of the atmosphere of secrecy and narrow channels of account-ability in which they operate.

The National Reconnaissance Office's existence is shielded from senior congressional intelligence overseers. Former high-ranking staff members of the National Security Council, who were cleared for some of the most sensitive intelligence material to reach the President's desk, acknowledged in interviews that they had not been informed about it.

Since the inception of the U.S. reconnaissance satellite program in the mid - 1950s to 1970 \$10 billion to \$12 billion has been spent on the space spies, according to an estimate by aviation and space writer Philip J. Klass in his book, "Secret Sentries in Space." Since then the outlay may have grown by about \$5 billion.

Such reconnaissance has proven of enormous value in providing more realistic assessments of such things as Soviet ballistic missile strength, both offensive and defensive. It helped, in fact, to calm public anxieties over the missile gap in the early 1960s. The most publicized use of the program was to support President Kennedy's contention that the Russians were installing offensive missiles in Cuba.

Congressional investigators in yet unpublicized inquiries are raising questions about relationships between corporate contractors and the supersecret programs being carried out under the aegis of the National Reconnaissance Office and other military intelligence agencies.

Proxmire's concern about the plummer appointment is one example of this.

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