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The Death of a Pilot

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We first heard the name Francis Gary Powers in a United States Government lie. On a day in May 1960, he was identified as the civilian pilot of an unarmed, space-agency weather plane that lost its way while photographing clouds over Turkey and allegedly strayed over Soviet terrain. When the Russians revealed that they'd shot him down, a wave of innocent indignation swept our land. How could we ever wet along with these barbarians who shoot first and complain later?

Then the Russians revealed that the U-2 plane had strayed into deepest Siberia, three hours flying time from any frontier; that they had captured Mr. Powers when his parachute brought him down in the plowed field near Sverdlovsk, and that they had gathered most of the pieces of his high-gliding craft, including remarkable cameras containing photographs of missile sites and airfields, taken in revealing detail from 12 miles up. President Eisenhower at first lied some more by denying knowledge of the espionage, but he finally came clean, denounced the Soviet Union as a secret society against which espionage was unfortunately the only defense, and watched his last chance of détente diplomacy with Nikita Khrushchev disappear.

Two years later, Francis Gary Powers was released from a Soviet prison and brought to Berlin to be exchanged for a Soviet colonel, Rudolf Abel, whose spying out of Brooklyn the Russians never acknowledged except in this transaction. Pilotless satellites in space took over the major portion of the work of both men. Mr. Powers went on to write a book about his service for the Central Intelligence Agency and to defend his instinctive refusal to destroy himself at the moment of capture. Premier Khrushchev had already defended him most eloquently—"Every living thing wants to live and when the plane was hit, the pilot bailed out"—but for many Americans at that time, the lie of a Government seemed to deserve a higher claim.

Eventually, Francis Gary Powers remarried and formed a new family and flew helicopters to monitor rush-hour traffic for a Los Angeles radio station. On Monday, while ferrying a cameraman to cover the fires in Santa Barbara, he apparently ran out of fuel and died in a crash near a Little League baseball field in the San Fernando Valley. As we read about him for the last time, we had trouble remembering that there was once a United States Government that was presumed by its citizens not to lie.