

**Taubman, Philip. Secret Empire: Eisenhower, The CIA, and the Hidden Story of America's Space Espionage. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003.**

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"Warfare is the Way (Tao) of deception."<sup>1</sup>

Today, the United States military conducts research into a wide variety of areas. This research is carried out in government laboratories and under contract to a large group of private firms. In all, research and development on military projects represents a sizeable share of the defense budget. Many of these projects never see the light of day, let alone a detailed historical study. The men and women who conduct the research, design the equipment, and build the weapons are never known outside a small community of researchers. They almost never receive public credit for their work. So when new research brings these efforts to light, it provides all of us, historians and non-historians alike, a window into these undertakings. Philip Taubman's latest work, *Secret Empire*, provides us a view into this world. During the eight years of President Eisenhower's two terms in office, the USAF and its scientific research efforts sought to create a satellite reconnaissance program. Known as WS-117L, this satellite effort had long-term implications for not only American intelligence efforts, but for the course of the Cold War as well. It is the story of Eisenhower's satellite reconnaissance program that Taubman seeks to pass on to his readers.

Philip Taubman, a veteran reporter and editor for the *New York Times*, has attempted to provide an account of satellite developments from their earliest origins in 1946 through to the creation of CORONA, the first successful reconnaissance satellite in 1960. For Taubman, the program is a success story that overcame a great many obstacles. Based on interviews and recently declassified documents, the book attempts to shed light on a topic that has always shunned such attention. To achieve this, Taubman has approached the topic in a three-step approach that is generally linear in form. The initial section of this study deals with "Reimagining Reconnaissance" during the period 1946-54. This section deals with the long-term roots of satellite reconnaissance. The first chapter sets the stage by examining the political and military developments during the period, focusing on the rising fear of confrontation with the USSR. The Korean conflict, the lack of intelligence on the USSR's military efforts, the appearance of nuclear weapons on both sides, and increasing Soviet bomber capabilities combined to demonstrate the need for increased intelligence.

The second chapter examines the origins of the concept of Strategic Intelligence and the influence of Richard S. Leghorn (whom the author describes as the closest thing to a progenitor of the reconnaissance revolution) in the rising understanding of a need for peacetime intelligence gathering. Chapters three through five examine two important elements that came into play at that time. Chapter three focuses on the role of RAND studies with respect to satellite reconnaissance, especially Project FEED BACK, the key study of 1954 which detailed the form of an expected photographic satellite. Chapters four and five look at Kelly Johnson, the U-2 aircraft, and the arrival of President

Eisenhower. As president, Eisenhower initiated a detailed study of the threat of a Soviet surprise attack on the US known as the Technological Capabilities Panel under James Killian in 1954. This panel examined a variety of elements relating to American national security, including American intelligence efforts. Coming out of this study was a clear call for a long-term solution to the American intelligence problem. One half of this solution was the U-2 aircraft. The other half was a satellite reconnaissance effort.

The second section of Taubman's work examines the development of the U-2 aircraft itself. Over four chapters, he details not only its development but also accounts for its design and the supervision of the program during operations, along with Eisenhower's concerns over secrecy and the political ramifications of intercepted aircraft. In the final section of his work, Taubman examines the American satellite reconnaissance effort. Chapter ten details the development of WS-117L up to Sputnik in October 1957. It also discusses Eisenhower's attempts to protect space-based reconnaissance endeavors through American space policies and its International Geophysical Year efforts. Chapters eleven through fifteen detail the development of the CORONA program, its problems, and the implications of the program. The book ends with an epilogue that attempts to bring the long-term costs of satellite reconnaissance into a slightly different focus. The author argues that the over emphasis on technical means of intelligence has been proven to be a handicap when trying to track terrorist cells or monitor nations for signs of nuclear testing as occurred in May 1998 when India started underground testing. A total surprise for the United States.

Tracing such a large program with a long development process is a daunting but necessary task if we are to understand more accurately the Cold War. The subject of Tom Clancy novels, spy satellites have existed for years but little is accurately known about them, their development, or their long-term implications for the Cold War or the current state of intelligence gathering and international relations. Logically, any understanding of satellite reconnaissance has to begin with an understanding of its development and the forces driving this development. Luckily, the process of declassification has begun to lift the veil of secrecy in this area. This should provide for a better history of the satellite program and the Eisenhower administration.

Unfortunately, Philip Taubman's efforts have failed to provide a definitive account of satellite reconnaissance or its development during the Eisenhower years. Though it is well written and provides an interesting and lively read, the work itself suffers from several shortcomings that stand out in opposition of the goals that Taubman sets for himself. Based on interviews and recently declassified documents, the book is subtitled the "Hidden Story of America's Space Espionage." However, the book fails to live up to this ambitious goal. Approximately a third of the book is focused on the development of the U-2 aircraft. Though an important element of American intelligence measures and a program inevitably tied to satellite reconnaissance as a stop gap effort, the U-2 seems to dominate the work excessively. This is ironic as numerous other books and articles have discussed the U-2 in greater detail. As no really new information relating to the U-2 is provided, the emphasis distracts the reader from satellite reconnaissance. Admittedly, the

author works it in very well, but it does not materially add to an understanding of either the U-2 or the satellite program.

With respect to the satellite effort, this work would better be described as a history of the CORONA program. Only one chapter really deals with the WS- 117L satellite initiative. Begun in December 1953 and running until Sputnik in 1957 (and beyond for a short period of time), the WS-117L program was the foundation of all American military satellite efforts. A direct descendent of the RAND studies, it broke ground in space research and development when no one believed it was possible. It also warrants only approximately 18 pages of the text. The CORONA program, an off shoot of the WS-117L effort that appears *after* Sputnik, dominates the discussion on satellite development. Other works have covered this area before, and in greater detail. Thus, Taubman's efforts tend to duplicate other works already available. The fact that he all but ignores the WS-117L effort is a disappointing omission. This program, virtually ignored by many, paved the way for CORONA and as such played a pivotal role. For almost four years it blazed a trail that CORONA could capitalize on later. Neglected in yet another work, until a good account of the WS-117L program during the years 1954-1957 is written, no study of satellite reconnaissance can be accurate let alone complete.

The only advantage that *Secret Empire* has are the interviews and more recently released documents. Here too Taubman's effort does not hold up to its promise. Repeatedly throughout the text he makes references to events or information but fails to provide adequate citations for the reader. The result is an account that appears accurate, but lacks enough support to be convincing. The lack of citations also raises the question of where the new documentation came from and where it is being used in the text. The end result is a work that is accurate in comparison to the other works in the field, but does not carry a great deal of weight on its own. The value that the new information should have had is lost on the reader.

The final weakness that stands out of Taubman's work is his understanding of why the program was initiated. The WS-117L program was created by the USAF to provide intelligence on the USSR. This is accurate. However, the question remains why did Eisenhower accept the program? Taubman clearly takes the position that the program was begun to gather important military intelligence. He takes the position that Eisenhower, aware of the importance of intelligence from past experience, accepted the program. Eisenhower was well aware of the importance of intelligence. However, a better understanding of the context of the Eisenhower administration is necessary. Were there other reasons for Eisenhower to accept the program? What other forces were at work? For a history of Eisenhower and space based reconnaissance, a better discussion of Eisenhower as president, his administration, and views is sorely needed.

Though an interesting and insightful story, Taubman's work does not break surprising new ground. His interviews and the new documents should have had an impact on his account. However, similar and more accurate studies can be found by a variety of authors. In that context, Taubman's work fails to provide a great deal of insightful

information. Though he presents an account that seems complete and up to date in a very readable format, Taubman fails to provide any really new information on the program.

### **Endnotes**

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1994), p. 168.

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