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July 31, 1964

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MEMORANDUM FOR MR. BUNDY

E.O. 12958, Sec. 3.6

NLJ 98-98

SUBJECT: Satellite Reconnaissance *By cb*, NARA Date *6-6-00*

On the initiative of the State Department, the "Alex Johnson Working Group" since early June has been developing recommendations for future courses of action in light of probable Soviet knowledge of and attitude toward photographic satellite reconnaissance and our long-range policy objectives relating to the best exploitation of our satellite reconnaissance capabilities.

Among various courses of action discussed was the early briefing of the North Atlantic Council on the U. S. and Soviet satellite reconnaissance programs. It is fair to say that most of the working group favored this course of action and the result was a draft briefing document that appeared to satisfy all the members of the group (although the CIA representatives made it clear that they could not guarantee a favorable response from the Director).

Subsequent to the last meeting of the group Mr. McCone informed Ambassador Thompson that he could not, for security reasons, agree to a briefing of the North Atlantic Council and indicated his intention of personally briefing the heads of State in October as an alternative to the NAC briefing. His proposed briefing reportedly is much less complete than the proposed draft for NAC and contains little that has not appeared in the press.

Ambassador Thompson informed Secretary Rusk of Mr. McCone's position and found that the Secretary agreed with Mr. McCone reportedly for "political reasons" that the NAC should not be briefed at this time.

The specific reasons behind Mr. McCone's and the Secretary's position are not clear and Spurg Keeny and I are of the opinion that the decision on this matter should be reviewed by the President because of its extremely important foreign policy and domestic political implications.

For your background, here are some of the pertinent considerations that prompted Alex Johnson to initiate this exercise in the first place:

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(1) The public knowledge of our reconnaissance satellite capability has been steadily increasing. Last December Howard Simons printed a feature article in the Post that compromised the general capability although, of course, the extent to which we use the capability and how refined it is is still highly secret and closely protected by CIA. Other publications have carried pieces similar to Simon's.

(2) Khrushchev's remarks to William Benton and Drew Pearson indicated an awareness and knowledge of our capability. Although this has done a great deal to legitimize satellite reconnaissance, Soviet intentions here are not yet clear. The State Department is concerned with the possibility that the Soviets may be pushing the question to attack the need for aerial reconnaissance of Cuba.

(3) The principal objective of the Alex Johnson group (and of U. S. policy), which was to work toward achieving legality and international support for the use of satellites for space observation and photography, has largely been achieved and the principal remaining task for U. S. policy is a tactical one of exploiting the capability to our national advantage without jeopardizing essential security aspects of the program.

(4) Our intelligence community agrees that we can no longer assume that the top Soviet policy makers are ignorant of the U. S. capability or that Soviet technicians cannot soon, if they have not already, achieve a close estimate of the true U. S. observation capability.

(5) The U. S. capability has been basic in the thinking underlying our principal arms control and disarmament proposals. Certain of these proposals would not be advanced or negotiated unless we could depend on the continued existence of satellite reconnaissance. If our disarmament policies become subject to partisan political attack, it might be difficult to defend them without revealing the assurances we gain from satellite reconnaissance in the absence of other satisfactory inspection arrangements. Similarly, satellite reconnaissance underlies much of our military planning for the defense of Europe and the deployment of U. S. forces in connection therewith. This also might enter into the political debates over the next few months.

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(6) The NAC has already [REDACTED] [REDACTED] largely obtained the end results of our reconnaissance program. The only thing they have not received has been an integrated presentation concerning our reconnaissance program, indicating how extensive it is, something of its technique, a comparison with the Soviet observation program, specific analysis of satellites in relation to Cuba, and the relationship of reconnaissance satellites to military defense and arms control and disarmament programs. The working group felt that such an integrated briefing was needed to bring our Allies up to date and to provide them with an organized body of information instead of the bits and pieces they now have. It would also be an interim step in the ultimate releasing of increasing amounts of knowledge concerning the U. S. program -- since many on the working group feel that disclosure will be inevitable in any case and therefore it should be planned rather than capricious or accidental.


Charles E. Johnson

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