17 March 1959

PROJECT CORONA - SECURITY IN 1960

Reference: Memorandum "Project CORONA" dated 11 March 1959 (COR-0372)

1. The referenced memorandum proposes that a series of eight CORONA flights be scheduled in calendar year 1960 as a continuation of the flights currently scheduled for the next eight months. A question arises as to whether, if this supplementary activity is approved and undertaken, an effort should be made, as with the series for 1959, to conceal its true purpose. If an affirmative decision is made on this matter, the 1960 flights would presumably be described as a continuation of the publicly announced DISCOVERY series. The alternative course of action might involve the identification forthwith within the Military establishment of the 1960 activity as a reconnaissance project entirely separate from the DISCOVERY series, to be handled in all respects as a normal Military project, and involve in due time a public announcement of the true mission. This is primarily a foreign policy decision but it requires an estimate (a) of the feasibility of maintaining security for a second year, and (b) of the impact on the original 1959 CORONA program of a public announcement concerning a 1960 series. The following comments are addressed to these topics.

2. The DISCOVERY series of satellite flights has been publicly described as a research and development activity with a variety of specific objectives including development flight testing of hardware, development and testing of procedures for the recovery of a satellite payload after flight, the study of environmental conditions relevant to human flight including measurement of certain types of radiation encountered at relatively low altitudes, tests of a satellite infra-red sensor as the prototype of an early warning device, and the exercise of tracking stations and other elements of a new ground environment. The official cover story states or implies that achievement of these specific objectives will contribute to the broad purposes of bringing a number of Military subsystems closer to operational status, of the achievement of man-in-space flight, and more generally contributing importantly to the ability of the Military establishment to design and operate missile and satellite systems. This official cover story was carefully designed and is constantly being supplemented in an effort to satisfy two requirements: First, that the operations undertaken under the name of the DISCOVERY series should not themselves be Military

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acts, and second, that they should nevertheless be activities appropriate to the Military establishment and of importance sufficient to justify an operation on a substantial scale. It should be noted that ARPA has announced programs involving the use of satellites for early warning and communications and involving the development of a manned recoverable space vehicle, thus confirming that the Defense establishment is actively pursuing all the long-range objectives which the DISCOVERY series allegedly serves.

3. The above-outlined official cover story has been embroidered and amplified in one important respect in the technical press. It was quickly recognized when the DISCOVERY series was announced that it would include certain operations originally contemplated as part of the SENTRY project. Accordingly, it was widely speculated that the DISCOVERY series is at least in part the research and development phase of SENTRY, that is, that a major purpose of the DISCOVERY series is development flight testing of basic hardware (vehicles, guidance, recovery system, and ground environment) which would ultimately be used for SENTRY. It would, perhaps, have been preferable if this inference could have been avoided but it was in fact foreseen before the public announcement of DISCOVERY that technical speculation would take this direction. Fortunately, there has been little speculation to date to the effect that the DISCOVERY series includes any operational flights of a reconnaissance vehicle. Given this development, it would be altogether infeasible to deny that there is an element of truth in this speculation, and to attempt to do so would simply call the whole CORONA cover story into question. Accordingly, current efforts are devoted to emphasizing the specific objectives of the DISCOVERY series as stated in the official cover story while freely admitting that this alleged research and development program will benefit not only the achievement of space flight and the development of early warning and communications satellites but also the development of the SENTRY reconnaissance system, which has long been an officially announced and identified Military program.

4. The above circumstances are cited as background for the judgment expressed in this and the following paragraph on the feasibility of maintaining reasonably effective cover for an extended CORONA series in 1960. The first such judgment which is offered here with some trepidation is that the principal threat to the security of the present or extended CORONA program is not that of unauthorized disclosure by properly witting individuals and that this threat, with good luck, can be contained. Major efforts have been made to limit the

number of persons knowledgeable of the program. The number is too large for comfort (and almost larger than it need be) but reasonable success has been achieved in impressing on all concerned the vital importance of security. The greatest danger of disclosure is that individuals in the Defense establishment, and especially various technical consultants, will surmise that some classified program is being carried on, will correctly guess its general character, and will feel free to discuss their surmise widely in the technical community. It is impossible to be sure that this will not happen but every effort is being made to detect the spread of informed rumor in the technical community and to halt it (usually by making the originator aware that there is a classified program and placing on them the responsibility for preserving its security).

5. The obverse of this limited optimism concerning disclosure is that the major danger to effective concealment of the true purpose of CORONA is that constituted by speculation in the technical press. It will be readily recognized that once great curiosity is aroused concerning a program of this character the efforts of skillful and well informed representatives of the press to ferret out more information from witting individuals in the Government or in the companies concerned are exceedingly difficult to resist. Accordingly, the only real defense against such speculation and its consequences is the construction and the constant amplification in detail and reiteration of a plausible cover story. If the ostensible purposes of the missile flights are in sufficient detail to answer the queries of the press, and if they are truly plausible, the danger is vastly reduced. It is believed that in the case of CORONA it has been possible to date and will continue to be possible to develop and sustain cover stories of this character (provided that administrative obstacles do not interfere). It is also believed, however, that to do so will require if anything increased reliance on the explanation that the DISCOVERY series is indeed contributing in an important way to the development of SENTRY. The reason that the above-mentioned speculation to this effect is an important part of the CORONA cover story is that the detectable connection of certain individuals and companies with DISCOVERY can most easily be explained by admitting the existence of a connection between the two programs. Moreover, if there should be any disclosure of work going forward on specifically reconnaissance subsystems, the disclosure could be covered in confusion if a connection between the two programs had been acknowledged. This is not to suggest any change in the policy of insisting that DISCOVERY is completely separate from SENTRY but only that the contribution of DISCOVERY as a developmental activity to SENTRY as an operational program should be tacitly acknowledged.

6. In summary, the preceding paragraphs are intended to express cautious optimism that it may be possible both to avoid unauthorized damaging disclosures concerning the true purpose of CORONA and that it will be possible to provide plausible explanations of an extended DISCOVERY series which characterize it as a continuing developmental activity. Care has been taken up to this point not to announce any firm schedule for the DISCOVERY series or any definitely scheduled number of flights. Hence, there is no need to announce a change of plans (which always invites attention) nor, indeed, to make at this time any announcement about the duration of the DISCOVERY series. If an affirmative decision is made on the proposal in the referenced memorandum for a 1960 series, it would probably be best either to say nothing at this time about the duration of the activity or to say frankly that the number of DISCOVERY flights has not yet been finally determined. This cautious optimism, it must be emphasized, is contingent upon continued more strenuous efforts by all concerned both to avoid unauthorized disclosure and to support the cover stories. In particular the maintenance of cover for CORONA (even through 1959) will require the stern exercise of authority at all appropriate points to discourage the kind of technical discussion in advisory committees and in Military and civilian components that quickly reveals the fact of a highly classified project, the purpose and character of which can then be readily surmised.

7. Finally, it must be repeated (from the last paragraph of the referenced memorandum) that the degree to which the cover of CORONA will be eroded in forthcoming months, and thereby the judgments expressed above, is inevitably subject to a high degree of uncertainty. Accordingly, if it is decided to conduct a series of flights with the CORONA vehicle in 1960 and if concealment of the true purpose of this activity is believed desirable, the best course of action might well be to embark on this program with every intention of conducting it under the security with which CORONA has been surrounded but to review the security status of the program in six months. If its cover has then begun to wear thin, it would probably be better in a carefully contrived manner to surface its true purpose. Alternatively, if cover is holding up well, the original intent can be adhered to. No attempt has been made here to comment on the importance of concealment of the reconnaissance mission. If this is of low importance, it will be well to decide at this point to surface the purpose of the 1960 program at a time and in a manner which will best preserve the security of CORONA in 1959. If, at the other extreme, the importance of concealing the mission is so great that the program could be carried out only if such concealment is effectively maintained, then it must be said in all honesty that there is a substantial risk that the objective cannot be achieved.

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