
Reviewed by Chris Pocock, Author, *The U-2 Spyplane: Toward the Unknown*

In this new account of U.S. aerial reconnaissance along and across Communist borders during the Cold War, an essential paradox is exposed in only the sixth paragraph of William Burrows’s preface, which notes the dual purpose of such flights. On the one hand, they were justified as a key means to keep track of military developments behind the Iron Curtain, thereby reducing the potential for a Soviet surprise attack or a disproportionate U.S. response. In this sense they helped to keep the peace. On the other hand, the flights were equally designed to identify targets for attack by U.S. strategic bombers and missiles, as well as deficiencies in Communist air defenses. In this sense they were an integral part of the U.S. war-fighting machine.

Until the advent of the specialized U-2 and Blackbird, all U.S. reconnaissance planes were adaptations of bombers or maritime patrol/attack aircraft. In the early–Cold War years these lumbering, piston-powered machines had large crews who were significantly exposed to enemy air defenses. Faster, jet-powered aircraft such as the RB-47 later provided a greater degree of security to their smaller crews. But when the aircraft were deliberately sent to violate Soviet airspace and were detected, how were Soviet early warning officers to know that this was not the start of a nuclear attack? The potential for miscalculation was great, as Burrows acknowledges in his discussion of Project Home Run. During a period of seven weeks in the spring of 1956, the U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC) mounted no fewer than 156 photo-reconnaissance and electronic intelligence-gathering missions over Siberia, including at least one formation overflight that the Soviet government protested.

U.S. government historians and other defenders of General Curtis LeMay, the aggressive chief of SAC in the 1950s, have always maintained that such overflights were duly authorized—if not by President Eisenhower himself then by proper delegation to regional or specified commanders. But no convincing documentary evidence of this has yet surfaced from the archives. Plenty of circumstantial evidence suggests that Eisenhower in fact was alarmed by such adventures—so much so, that he gave operational control of U-2 overflights to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) rather than the military. After the advent of the U-2 in 1956, Eisenhower insisted that there be no more military overflights of the Soviet Union.

Burrows has not shed new light on the question of whether certain U.S. overflights in the early to mid-1950s were properly authorized. However, he seems willing to justify them as necessary for deterrence. The Communist powers, he writes, “understood (that) nuclear weapons made their vast frontiers dangerously irrelevant, and that where reconnaissance planes could penetrate, bombers could as well” (p. 320).

A recurring theme of the book is that the politics of peacetime aerial reconnaissance meant that pilots and crew members who were unfortunate enough to be attacked were more vulnerable than combat personnel flying in wartime. The men who
conducted these highly classified missions “were officially ignored when they succeeded and were a political embarrassment when they were shot down” (p. 319). Time and again when reconnaissance flights were attacked, the U.S. government would not deviate from officially sanctioned cover stories, which usually depicted the missions as navigation training sorties or weather reconnaissance flights. Each shoot-down was followed by a period of “ritualized lying and posturing” (p. 38) between the U.S. State Department and Soviet Foreign Ministry, according to Burrows. The implicit assumption was that any survivors who fell into enemy hands “would be written off” (p. 39).

The human toll was considerable. Burrows lists no fewer than 163 Air Force personnel aircrew in sixteen aircraft as missing or killed on peacetime reconnaissance missions during the Cold War (pp. 353–356). The book is at its best when describing these incidents, most of them in considerable detail, by drawing on contemporary accounts, declassified documents, and interviews with participants. Unfortunately, though, other parts of the book are deficient. Chapter 2 is a rambling and unfocused attempt to set the Cold War scene, and Chapter 3 starts with a whimsically selective history of early aerial reconnaissance. The final chapter contains a somewhat uncomplimentary review of official post–Cold War attempts to provide a proper accounting of the shootdowns.

The book also contains some regrettable errors. For instance, Big Safari (p. 69) is the name of a streamlined procurement agency within the U.S. Air Force that modifies aircraft for reconnaissance; it is not the name of an operational mission. General LeMay did not conceive the U-2 (p. 100); indeed, he fought the concept. Bud Wheelon did not run the Oxcart (Blackbird) program at the CIA, and he was head of the science and technology directorate there from 1963 to 1966, not earlier (p. 274).

These mistakes, however, do not detract from a thorough and worthwhile addition to the growing literature on Cold War intelligence gathering.

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Reviewed by Harvey M. Sapolsky, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Lloyd V. Berkner is a Zelig-like character in the world of twentieth-century American science policy. He accompanied Admiral Richard Byrd on his famous expedition to the Antarctic. He worked at the Radiation Laboratory of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), helping to develop radar during the Second World War. He was a key assistant to Vannevar Bush in the effort to organize military research and development after the war. He proposed the convening of the International Geophysical Year that eventually led to the launching of Sputnik and its American counterparts. He advocated increased federal support for fundamental science and most particularly