

**Robert M. Dienesch.** *Eyeing the Red Storm: Eisenhower and the First Attempt to Build a Spy Satellite.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 328 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-5572-2.



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**Published on** H-War (January, 2017)

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Robert M. Dienesch's examination of the Eisenhower administration's efforts to attain effective satellite reconnaissance on the Soviet Union during the 1950s is another major accomplishment in a crucial aspect of history that until recently had been underserved.

The book is divided into two halves. The first half establishes the context of the Cold War and the need for strategic surveillance. In contrast to the more open social structure of the United States, the Soviet Union was relatively impenetrable to strategic intelligence efforts of the 1940s and early 1950s. Cold War security depended on credible estimations of the adversary's strength, developments, and intentions. Early US efforts to deploy human agents in Soviet-dominated territory immediately floundered as spies were quickly hunted down. With the Cold War heating up in the 1950s and speculations about Soviet bomber forces and missile stockpiles stirring increasing concern, President Dwight Eisenhower desperately needed a tool for attaining reliable data on the Soviet Union. The high-flying U-2 spy plane was a stopgap and was understood by Eisenhower and his closest advisors in those terms. The Soviet menace was real, but earlier efforts to contain Soviet threats risked damage to the US economy and national character and invited special pleading by branches of the military. Eisenhower

faced a "three-pronged threat," and "the true nature of the cold war, the economic threat ... and pressure from the military ... served as a major impetus for Eisenhower's acceptance of space-based reconnaissance" (p. 56). Dienesch's is one of the newest works to clarify this dynamic in Eisenhower's decision making, with respect to national security, intelligence data, and space.

The text truly comes into its own in the second half, through its extensive and groundbreaking exploration of the air force's WS-117L satellite program. As the author indicates, this program has been misunderstood and only hazily perceived for the past half century. It was given several different designations, contributing to the confusion. Air force references to the Advanced Reconnaissance System, Project Number 1115, Pied Piper, and WS-117L refer to overlapping work. The program itself also underwent extensive modification and stood beyond the realm of cutting-edge technology, compounding confusion. Elements of WS-117L were also broken off from air force control, officially canceled, quietly rebranded, and given to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as the heart of the secret CORONA surveillance system. In that regard, from the administration's standpoint, the greater the degree of public confusion, the

more likely the project might also be hidden from the Soviets. Dienesch's description of the WS-117L's tortured history is excellent. The program languished without powerful supporters until it was transferred to the air force's Western Development Division in early 1956. Between late 1957 and the end of 1958, however, the program was buffeted by several important but under-documented changes, and it emerged from this period fractured into three pieces: the DISCOVERER that served as a blind for the CIA's CORONA surveillance system, the SENTRY/SAMOS film readout surveillance satellite, and the MIDAS ballistic missile early warning satellite system. Both SENTRY/SAMOS and MIDAS would be canceled in the early 1960s, with the former a technological failure and the latter prone to false positives when misidentifying solar heat reflected from a cloud as being a potential Soviet missile launch. By "seeking a 'perfect' satellite, capable of a wide variety of missions, the air force closed its eyes to the mission of acquiring photographic intelligence on the Soviet Union as soon as possible" (pp. 182-183).

The historical topic has long remained shrouded in unclarity, and the clandestine nature of strategic surveillance contributed to this. As Dienesch relates, even the first US forays into pursuing satellite reconnaissance were necessarily cloaked behind policy initiatives and projects (notably, VANGUARD and DISCOVERER) that obscured the reason for administration interest in space-flight. Soviet objections to satellite reconnaissance, and even the later bilateral accession by the United States and USSR to each other's satellite findings, were garbed in deliberately opaque language. Even some of the key pioneers in advocating the development of surveillance

satellites were cut out of the loop when the decision was taken to develop such a system. The covert but active presidential style adopted by Eisenhower further ensured that understanding of the history of satellite reconnaissance would remain murky for decades. Dienesch points to Eisenhower's actions and rightly insists that "these were not the decisions of a hands-off chief executive" (p. 69).

Declassification and discovery of key documents has empowered recent historians in providing a more meaningful and nuanced portrait of President Eisenhower and his security policy. Interested readers will appreciate the excellent historiographical appendix that outlines the major themes of many of the preceding books engaging with Eisenhower's presidency and security affairs. The dominant trend for a generation had been to underestimate Eisenhower; this was powerfully challenged in terms of broad policymaking by Fred I. Greenstein in *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (1982) and regarding space history by Walter A. McDougall with *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* (1985). Declassifications and discoveries of important records in the last few years have provided rich sources with which to build further.

In addition to including an extensive, compelling, and superbly researched study of the WS-117L, Dienesch delivers an engaging, thoughtful, and well-written manuscript that is a pleasure to read. *Eyering the Red Storm* is an important contribution and a worthy resource for undergraduate or graduate settings as well as for readers interested in the history of satellite reconnaissance and Cold War strategy.

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**Citation:** Nicholas Sambaluk. Review of Dienesch, Robert M., *Eyering the Red Storm: Eisenhower and the First Attempt to Build a Spy Satellite*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2017.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46385>



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