

CHAPTER
18

Section 4

PRIMARY SOURCE *from* Dwight D. Eisenhower's
Statement on the U-2 Incident

When Nikita Khrushchev announced that an American U-2 had been shot down over Soviet territory, U.S. officials at first denied that the U-2 was a spy plane. Then, President Dwight D. Eisenhower decided to tell the truth in a TV and radio broadcast. As you read this excerpt from his speech, keep in mind the reasons he gives for spying on the Soviets.

Our safety, and that of the free world, demand, of course, effective systems for gathering information about the military capabilities of other powerful nations, especially those that make a fetish of secrecy. This involves many techniques and methods. In these times of vast military machines and nuclear-tipped missiles, the ferreting out of this information is indispensable to free-world security. . . .

I take full responsibility for approving all the various programs undertaken by our government to secure and evaluate military intelligence.

It was in the prosecution of one of these intelligence programs that the widely publicized U-2 incident occurred.

Aerial photography has been one of many methods we have used to keep ourselves and the free world abreast of major Soviet military developments. The usefulness of this work has been well established through four years of effort. The Soviets were well aware of it. . . . Only last week, in his Paris press conference, Chairman Khrushchev confirmed that he knew of these flights when he visited the United States last September.

Incidentally, this raises the natural question—why all the furor concerning one particular flight? He did not, when in America last September, charge that these flights were any threat to Soviet safety. He did not then see any reason to refuse to confer with American representatives. This he did only about the flight that unfortunately failed, on May 1, far inside Russia.

Now, two questions have been raised about this particular flight: first, as to its timing, considering the imminence of the summit meeting; second, our initial statement when we learned the flight had failed.

As to the timing, the question was really whether to halt the program and thus forgo the gathering of

important information that was essential and that was likely to be unavailable at a later date. The decision was that the program should not be halted. The plain truth is this: When a nation needs intelligence activity, there is no time when vigilance can be relaxed. Incidentally, from Pearl Harbor we learned that even negotiation itself can be used to conceal preparations for a surprise attack.

Next, as to our government's initial statement about the flight, this was issued to protect the pilot, his mission, and our intelligence processes, at a time when the true facts were still undetermined.

Our first information about the failure of this mission did not disclose whether the pilot was still alive, was trying to escape, was avoiding interrogation, or whether both plane and pilot had been destroyed. Protection of our intelligence system and the pilot, and concealment of the plane's mission, seemed imperative. . . .

I then made two facts clear to the public: first, our program of aerial reconnaissance had been undertaken with my approval; second, this government is compelled to keep abreast, by one means or another, of military activities of the Soviets, just as their government has for years engaged in espionage activities in our country and throughout the world.

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Discussion Questions

1. What reasons does Eisenhower give for gathering information about the Soviet military?
2. In your opinion, was the United States right to spy on the Soviets during the Cold War? Support your opinion with facts and reasons.