CORONA and the Intelligence Community

Kevin C. Ruffner

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On 24 May 1995, CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence (CSI) concluded a day-and-a-half conference on satellite intelligence at George Washington University. Cosponsored with GWU's Space Policy Institute, the conference—entitled "Piercing the Curtain: CORONA and the Revolution in Intelligence"— marked a significant event in CIA's efforts to provide more information to the American public.

Three years earlier, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Robert Gates launched CIA's openness program and expanded CSI's duties. Shortly after becoming DCI, Gates formed the Classification Review Task Force (CRTF) to examine the feasibility of releasing satellite imagery.

R. James Woolsey, who succeeded Gates as DCI in 1993, continued his predecessor's initiatives. In September of that year, Woolsey informed the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence that "when protection of certain information is no longer required, then we owe it to our citizens to work hard to disclose as much of that information as we can, consistent with our mission—warts and all." Even before Woolsey's testimony on Capitol Hill, CSI Director David D. Gries had made plans to hold a conference on satellite intelligence. The end of the Cold War had spurred interest in satellites and their possible use for environmental and other studies.

When CSI's working group for the satellite intelligence conference met in July 1993, Gries expected to hold it in February 1994. Composed of representatives from CSI, the Office of Research and Development (ORD), the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC), and other elements of the Intelligence Community (IC), including the then-classified National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) and the Central Imagery Office (CIO), the working group anticipated few problems with the conference. As with other CSI events, such as the Cuban missile crisis and Truman conferences, the History Staff planned to publish an edited book of declassified documents. CSI also expected to release a CIA film, *A Point in Time: The CORONA Story*, which the Agency had produced shortly after the program closed in 1972.

CSI moved ahead with the conference planning, and the working group held monthly meetings. David Doyle, a newly retired NPIC officer, and A. Roy Burks, the former director of the Office of SIGINT Operations in the Directorate of Science and Technology (DS&T), prepared invitation lists and organized the overall conference program and speakers. As a historian with CIA's History Staff, I concentrated on gathering original documents for the book. Robert A. McDonald, an NRO officer, and two officials from CIO contributed to the working group by providing updates on the declassification efforts within the IC.

Declassification Problems

Declassification proved to be the most difficult aspect of the entire conference. By early 1994, the

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CRTF, composed of representatives from offices within the IC, recommended the release of imagery from the CORONA, ARGON, and LANYARD satellite systems. These satellites, also known as KEYHOLE (KH) 1, 2, 3, 4, 4A, 4B, 5, and 6, were the first US reconnaissance satellites; they were used between 1960 and 1972, and they had long been obsolete. The CRTF determined that the release of KH 1-6 imagery posed no threat to national security. Spurred by Congressional interest and an interagency Environmental Task Force, the CRTF advocated the full release of the imagery, overwhelmingly from the CORONA system, to a public repository.

The CRTF's recommendations raised a number of questions within the IC during the first months of 1994. For example, how should the United States acknowledge the fact that it took photographs of countries, both friendly and hostile, for decades? Likewise, various Community members expressed concern that satellites took photographs of the United States because this raised the specter of domestic spying. The declassification of satellite imagery also invariably meant that its technology, both of the cameras and the satellites themselves, would also be released to the public.

A number of other seemingly insurmountable problems confronted the advocates of declassification. The release of the imagery required the concurrence of the entire IC and obtaining this permission took time. The IC similarly would have to change a number of regulations, security control measures, and international handling guidelines to reflect the declassification of KH 1-6. Perhaps the most perplexing issue,

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and one that haunted the entire CORONA conference, centered on the implications of this declassification and release for future Freedom and Information Act (FOIA) requests from the public. If the IC released information and imagery on KH 1-6, could it still protect later systems, technology, imagery, and intelligence reports?

The FOIA question eventually delayed both CORONA's declassification and CSI's conference. By June 1994, the conference, which had reached the final planning stages, lay dead in the water. After reviewing the overall declassification packet, IC attorneys advised that the DCI could not authorize the declassification of any satellite system. Only the President of the United States could make this decision; consequently, the decision to declassify CORONA moved to the White House. While the lawyers mulled over the fine points of the law, ORD continued to collect all KH 1-6 imagery and technical aids from NPIC and other sources.

NRO Participation

In the fall of 1994, a new player entered the scene. The NRO, which had only recently "come out of the cold," expressed its interest in cooperating with the National Space Club to host a 35th anniversary commemoration of the first successful "DISCOVERER" mission in 1960 (the public covername for the first CORONA flights). Robert A. McDonald, who had helped CSI's working group, now headed up the NRO effort with Air Force Col. Phil Datema. The NRO, in conjunction with the National Space Club, separately planned to host a large gathering at the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, in May 1995. The NRO and CSI frequently consulted, however, and, as it turned out, the commemoration and the conference complemented each other.

Vice Presidential Involvement

The NRO, like CSI, still faced the overall problem of declassification. Until President Clinton actually declassified the very existence of CORONA, the IC could do little in terms of hosting conferences, commemorations, or publishing articles and books. Vice President Gore, who as a senator had been a leading proponent of the study of the environment, now took up the CORONA issue in the White House. Splitting it from the general 25-year declassification order then under consideration, the Vice President pushed for an separate executive order that solely covered CORONA imagery.

On 24 February 1995, the Vice President visited CIA's Headquarters, where he announced Executive Order 12951. This order, signed by President Clinton two days earlier, released CORONA, ARGON, and LANYARD imagery (over 2 million linear feet with some 800,000 photographs) over the next 18 months to the National Archives and the US Geological Survey. The order also

stipulated that all the imagery would be declassified immediately upon transfer and be made available to the public. The President also called for the review of other satellite systems for possible declassification by the DCI.

At the announcement of the executive order, Vice President Gore recognized the value of the satellite imagery. "Satellite coverage," he said, "gave us the confidence to pursue arms control agreements—agreements that eventually led to dramatic decreases in the number of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems." He also observed that satellites "recorded much more than the landscape of the Cold War. In the process of acquiring this priceless data, we recorded for future generations the environmental history of the Earth at least a decade before any country on this Earth launched any Earth resource satellites."

Acting DCI Studeman also spoke at the declassification ceremony. "These satellite systems," he remarked, "are obsolete now, but in their time they played a pivotal role in our national security. As we debate the role and mission of intelligence in the next century, it is important to understand how the images sent back by these early satellites altered our view of the world during the Cold War and how satellite imagery continues to shape our world view today."

Positive Publicity

The declassification ceremony and the release of four early CORONA images, including a picture from the first successful CORONA flight in 1960, was an enormous success. *The New York Times*, for example, carried the news of CORONA's declassification in a front page banner article. At CIA Headquarters, ADCI Studeman informed the public that CSI planned a major conference in May 1995 to discuss the development of CORONA, its use by the IC, and the impact that satellites had on intelligence and US foreign policy. This publicity generated a large volume of telephone calls to the Center for further information about the conference.

Racing the Clock

CSI now had less than three months to organize a major conference, schedule speakers, and make all the other arrangements. Carole Minor, the Center's Academic Coordinator, and David Doyle, the retired NPIC officer now back as a conference planner, dusted off the Center's plans from the previous spring. As the editor of the History Staff's publication of CORONA documents, I and other members of the History Staff faced the task of getting the book published in time for the 23 May conference date. The NRO, in the meantime, prepared for the National Space Club event at the Smithsonian and assisted CSI's conference by restoring and declassifying the film, *A Point in Time*.

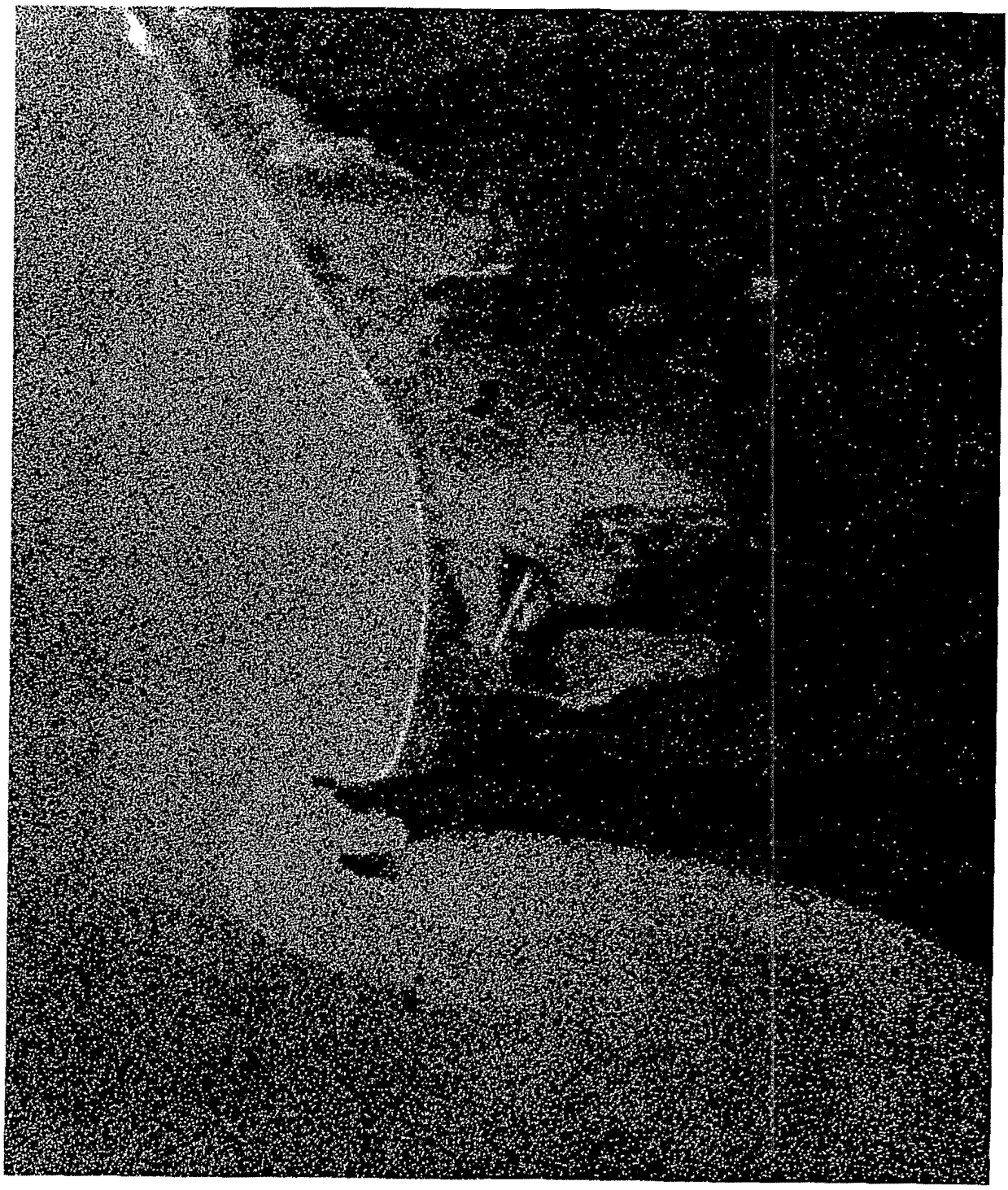
An Arduous Task

The declassification battle had not been won with the signing of the executive order in late February. President Clinton's decision covered only CORONA, ARGON, and LANYARD *imagery* (the terms TALENT and KEYHOLE were also subsequently declassified). The order, for example, did not apply to intelligence reports derived from KH 1-6 imagery or any other mission-related data. In addition to my book of CORONA documents, Bob McDonald planned to write two articles for the *Journal of Photogrammetric Engineering and Remote Sensing*, and we both needed the DCI's personal approval before the release of any textual information on CORONA.

In my case, no formal system existed to declassify CORONA material. Working with the DS&T, NPIC, CIO, and NRO, an ad hoc team of declassification experts met over the course of two weeks in March 1995 to conduct a line-by-line review of the documents I had selected for the History Staff publication. These documents, primarily memorandums from the early Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance in 1960 and various intelligence reports from CORONA, came from scattered NPIC files. One lengthy article, the first history of the CORONA program, had been published in a top-secret supplement to *Studies in Intelligence* in 1973.

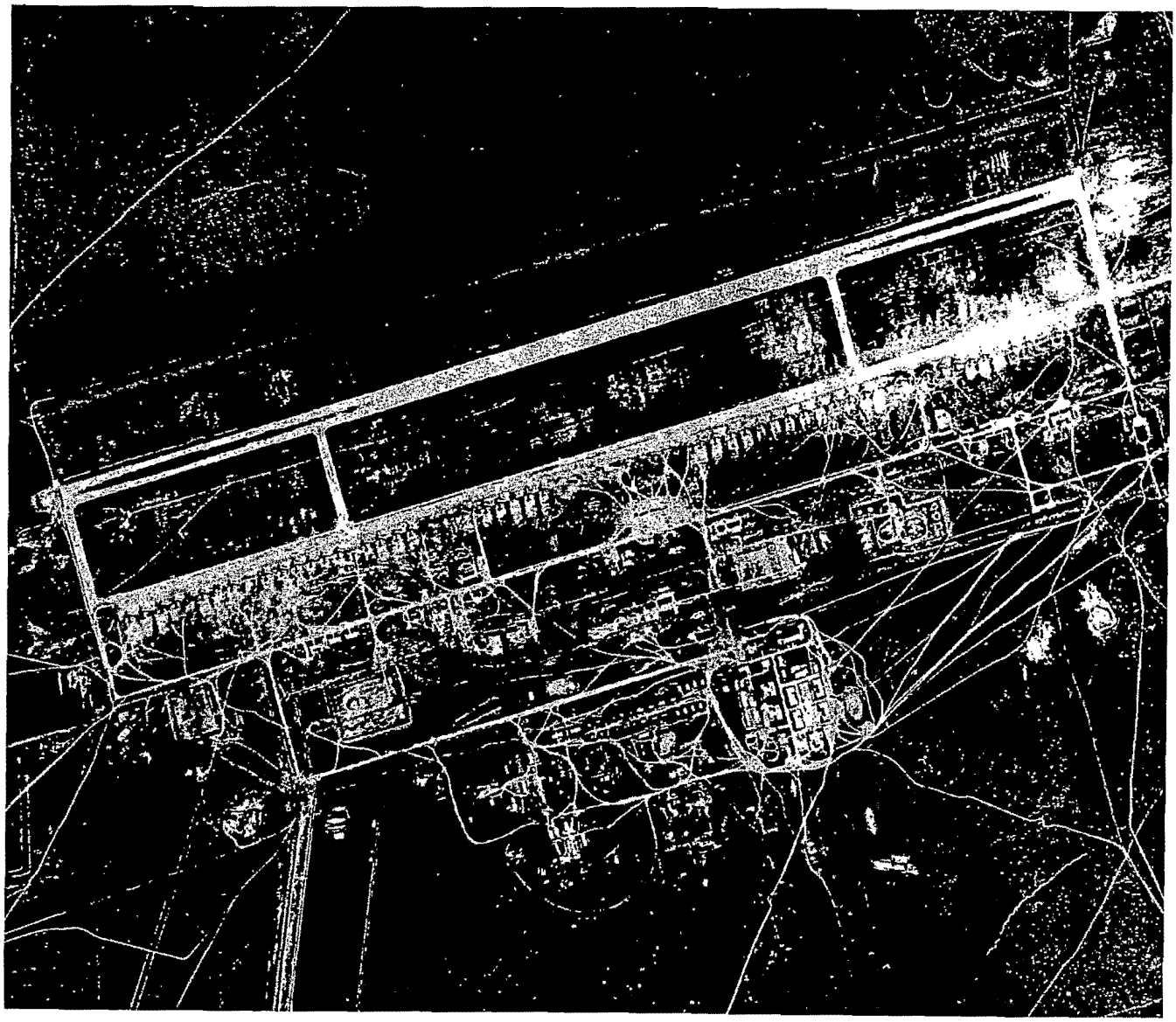
The documents themselves posed an interesting dilemma for the ad hoc declassification group. The members, all of whom had experience with general declassification policies and FOIA requests, had never released any information pertaining to satellites. Some documents contained codewords, cover details, financial information, and human or communications intelligence, or discussed targets in sensitive areas of the world. While the executive order authorized the release of CORONA imagery, U-2 photographs and intelligence reports still remained

Soviet Airfield (first image), 18 August 1960

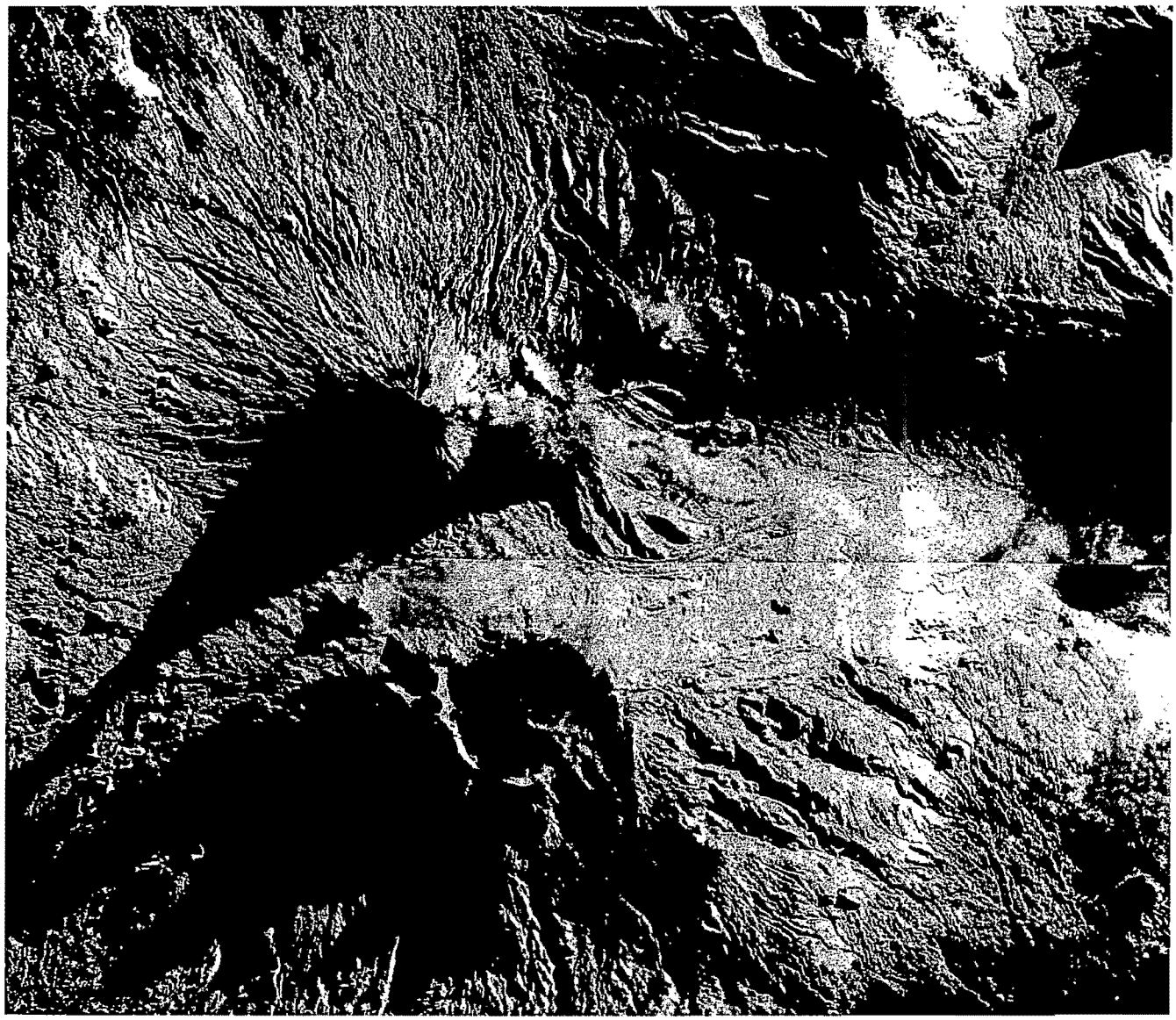


Aral Sea, 29 August 1962

Soviet Long-Range Aviation Airfield, 20 August 1966



Klyuchevskaya Volcano, 24 November 1962



classified. Consequently, the ad hoc committee members consulted with declassification authorities at other IC agencies, including the Department of State, the Air Force, and the National Security Agency. Reviewers with CSI's Historical Review Group and the Directorate of Intelligence's Collection Requirements and Evaluation Staff also supported the CORONA declassification effort.

By mid-April, the ad hoc committee had completed its review, and I now faced the task of "sanitizing" or marking out the portions of the documents that required continued classification. I also had to line out all the old classification "headers" and "footers," a massive amount of work considering that there were some 350 pages of documents. After that point, I sent the complete package to the ad hoc committee members to ensure that nothing had been inadvertently deleted or left out. At the same time, J. Kenneth McDonald, the retiring Chief Historian; Kay Oliver, the newly assigned Chief Historian; Diane Marvin, the History Staff's editor; and I reviewed the text of the book and prepared the entire manuscript for publication.

While the CIA has an effective editorial and publications staff, including its own printing plant, it still requires sufficient lead time to prepare a manuscript for publication. Normally, the Agency prefers to have two months to edit a document, prepare the page layout, and print a book before its actual release date. In CORONA's case, the History Staff did not get the green light to proceed with the manuscript until the end of February. By the time the ad hoc group finished its work, more than a month had passed. Consequently, the draft of *CORONA: America's First Satellite Program* did not arrive at the Office of Current Production and Analytical Support (CPAS) until early May—only three weeks before the conference date.

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High-Level Reviewing

Just as the History Staff grappled with getting the text to the editors, it also battled for the declassification of the book at the highest levels of CIA's structure. Following the advice of the Agency's Office of General Counsel, the entire book (both its text and the redacted documents) underwent reviews by the General Counsel and the Deputy Director for Science and Technology (DDS&T), whose office "owned" the original records.

Finally, DCI approval was sought for declassification and publication of the entire volume. On 24 April, Brian Latell, who had become Director of CSI in October 1994, submitted the entire package of documents and a cover memorandum to the Acting DCI recommending the declassification of the material and its publication in time for the Center's conference on CORONA.

As the package made its way through the Agency, concerns about the declassification and the ramifications for future FOIA requests once again nagged CSI. Almost at the 11th hour, Latell, with the timely assistance of several declassification experts, persuaded senior Agency officials that the release of this material would neither damage national security nor set a bad precedent for future declassification issues. In contrast, Latell demonstrated that the release of this material would mark a significant step forward in the Agency's efforts at openness, while still safeguarding CIA's legitimate need to protect sources and methods.

Acting DCI Studeman supported the Center's position and approved the declassification of the CORONA book on 7 May, thereby allowing the editors and designers at CPAS to complete their work on the manuscript and to send it to the Printing and Photographic Group (P&PG) for printing. While the History Staff waited for its book, Dave Doyle contacted speakers for the conference. He also completed work on the framing of over a dozen poster-size CORONA images for the conference. Carole Minor and her new staff member, Mary Burns, handled last-minute coordination matters with John Logsdon, director of GWU's Space Policy Institute.

A Splendid Day

On 23 May all the many pieces fell into place. CSI distributed 600 copies of *CORONA: America's First Satellite Program* to the conference attendees despite a last-minute printing glitch that both CPAS and P&PG quickly resolved. The film, *A Point in Time*, made its public debut on the morning of the first day of the conference and met with rave reviews. The new DCI, John Deutch, opened the conference and expressed his strong support for openness and CSI's undertakings.

More than 500 people attended the sessions, including numerous media representatives, and feedback from the audience demonstrated the widespread interest in the overall topic of satellite intelligence. The NRO's collaborative efforts with the National Space Club also achieved crowning success both at CIA Headquarters and the National Air and Space Museum on 24 May.

Need for Persistence

While the CORONA conference is now history and the imagery is on its way to the National Archives and the US Geological Survey, the battle for full declassification is not finished. The American public learned more about satellite reconnaissance on 23 and 24 May 1995 than it had known during the previous 35 years. Articles, books, and television documentaries are now incorporating this new information about CORONA, while the IC looks at the declassification of related topics, such as U-2 imagery.

Albert D. Wheelon, the first DDS&T, perhaps expressed it best at the CSI conference. Talking about the trials and tribulations experienced by the CORONA pioneers, Wheelon noted that "the main lesson of CORONA is to be persistent." The declassification of CORONA has also been a lesson in persistence. It took 35 years and the end of the Cold War to bring about CORONA's release to the public. Thanks to persistence throughout the IC, CORONA resulted in one of the largest declassification projects in American history.