

**Volume 3**

**Number 177**

**Spy Satellites**

**Lead: It was mid-August 1960. In a White House ceremony, President Dwight D. Eisenhower displayed a United States flag that been recovered from an environmental satellite orbiting the earth. He wasn't exactly telling the whole truth.**

**Tag: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: Actually, the flag had been carried into orbit aboard *Discoverer XIII* and was returned to earth in an ejected capsule which was then recovered from its splash down point northwest of Hawaii by a Navy**

**taskforce. It was the first time an object had been catapulted into earth orbit and brought back without mishap, but this exercise was far more than patriotic chauvinism. The *Discoverer* program was a ruse, a clever cover-up for a secret reconnaissance operation known as *Corona*.**

**In the years following World War II, as relations between the United States and the Soviet Union had gone from tolerant at best to bad to worse, and then had provoked a Cold War, the need for an accurate assessment of Russian military capability was very important. This need intensified in the years following Russia's development of the atomic bomb. Various schemes**

were tried. Risky low-level flights along the border, very high-altitude balloons floated from west to east and then later recovered over the Pacific, and beginning in 1955 the U-2 spy plane. It made 24 photographic incursions deep into the heart of Russia, but they had to be suspended when CIA pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down over the Urals in May, 1960. The *Corona* spy satellite program was the solution. After a dozen frustrating failures of rocket or payload, *Discoverer XIII* brought home a flag in a canister full of photos of secret Soviet military installations. Soon the Russians had their own spy satellites flying.

**Over the years the *Corona* program was able to provide accurate information so that U.S. policy makers could respond appropriately to crisis situations such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ironically, spy satellites helped paved the way for arms reduction agreements. Because they were fairly confident of knowing their opponent's capabilities, Americans and the Soviets were able move toward accommodation.**

**At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

**Copyright by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.**