

**THE RHETORIC AND INTELLIGENCE
OF THE 1960 U-2 AFFAIR**

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It is ironic that President Eisenhower, the decorated general, so successful in fighting the Cold War on non-military fronts. Eisenhower's experience in the army gave him an appreciation for resources such as intelligence and psychological warfare. He won a series of rhetorical victories over his Soviet counterparts more fitting for a career politician or lawyer. This is one of the reasons the U-2 incident of 1960 is so unique. The arrest and trial of Francis Gary Powers was a major propaganda victory for the Soviet Union, and the Soviet position was aided by the American president's lack of accurate intelligence.

President Eisenhower assigned the Central Intelligence Agency the U-2 program in 1954.¹ Among other concerns, U.S. officials wanted to collect more accurate details about the Soviet military – particularly nuclear – status.² Edwin Land, Nobel laureate and inventor of the Polaroid camera developed the photographic equipment³ and Kell Johnson and Lockheed Aircraft Corporation designed the aircraft.⁴ The U-2 was capable of flying at unprecedented altitudes and producing remarkable images. U-2 photographs taken from 70,000 feet in the air could reveal people and even golfballs on the ground.⁵

The craft's high-altitude ability was necessary so the plane could evade Soviet radar and anti-aircraft measures. Designers believed Soviet radar would not be able to track planes flying at altitudes near 70,000 feet. Even if the planes were detected during an overflight of foreign soil, Soviet missile technology would not be able to harm a craft at such altitudes. Indeed, during test flights, U.S. radar stations were unable to accurately track the plane⁶ and neither Soviet MiGs nor surface-to-air missiles were able to reach U-2 during the craft's early overflights.⁷ Despite these positive reports, Eisenhower understood the project's risk. Upon approving the plane's production, he even

commented, “Some day one of these machines is going to be caught, and then we’ll have a storm.”⁸

Although the president worried about future problems with the U-2 program, the top-secret project gave him an opportunity to win a battle in his continuing war of rhetoric with the Soviet Union. Production of the high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft set the stage for Eisenhower’s Open Skies proposal at the Geneva summit in 1955.

At the Geneva summit, Eisenhower proposed a plan for the world’s nuclear powers, “To give each other a complete blueprint of our military establishments,... to provide within our countries facilities for aerial photography to the other country ... to convince the world that we are providing between ourselves against the possibility of great surprise attack, thus lessening danger and relaxing tensions.”⁹ The president clearly described his intent to “convince everyone of the great sincerity of the United States in approaching this problem of disarmament.”¹⁰

As he had done during his Atoms for Peace speech, Eisenhower appeared to be making significant humanitarian gestures.¹¹ In both instances, Eisenhower offered a challenge to the Soviet leadership – a challenge he anticipated they would not accept. This created a perception that the United States was pursuing better relations between the superpowers while the Soviet Union was hindering such steps.

Actually, the president was offering, in effect, the sleeves off his vest. Open Skies would give the United States a wealth of information, but the Soviets would gain little new knowledge.¹² Eisenhower knew Soviet technology could not match the CIA’s U-2 and as a result, the Soviets would not be able to take advantage of an Open Skies policy as well as the Americans could. This was similar to Khrushchev’s statement at the Paris

summit that any country was free to conduct satellite surveillance – when the Soviet Union was the only country that had demonstrated satellite technology.¹³

Referring to his Open Skies proposal, Eisenhower said, “We knew the Soviets would not accept it.”¹⁴ The proposal was not intended to gain Soviet approval, but to win a propaganda victory and paint the United States as the champion of peace.¹⁵ The United States was offering to abdicate its sovereignty of airspace in an attempt to improve international relations. The proposal would be detrimental to the Soviet Union, but by turning it down, Soviet leadership appeared to be standing in the way of improved relations. The strategy worked well. Public opinion surveys from Western European countries showed overwhelming approval of Open Skies.¹⁶ Nelson Rockefeller said, “There is little doubt that the conference increased hope in Western Europe that world problems might be solved.”¹⁷

The propaganda success required several rhetorical strategies. Eisenhower chose his words carefully. He did not publicly describe a program to spy on the communist state’s military resources, but rather a program to reduce fears and dangers of surprise nuclear hostility between the superpowers. By withholding information from his audience – the fact the CIA possessed a state-of-the-art high-altitude reconnaissance plane – Eisenhower effectively used this challenge to cast the United States as the sole seekers of peace in the Cold War.

Despite Soviet rejection of Open Skies, U-2 overflights of the Soviet Union began on July 4, 1956.¹⁸ The intelligence produced by the program was remarkable. Prior to the overflight program, the U.S. Air Force estimated that the Soviet military would possess as many as 800 long-range bombers by 1960. During the 1954 May Day parade,

squadrons of Bison bombers were filmed flying over Red Square. Many in the United States feared a bomber gap between the superpowers. U-2 reconnaissance eliminated these fears. Analysts later determined the May Day film actually showed a single squadron of bombers flying in circles.¹⁹ U-2 photography showed the Soviet Union had less than 200 Bison bombers in 1959.²⁰

U-2 intelligence determined a shift in Soviet production from bombers to missile technology.²¹ U-2s were equipped with electronic surveillance modules that could record signal data. With this information, analysts were able to follow the progress of Soviet technology advances. The United States was gaining detailed information on the Soviet Union for the first time. After destroying the bomber gap myth early in its career, in 1959 the U-2 turned toward concerns of a growing missile gap. With highly publicized satellite launches, many Americans worried about Soviet technological superiority. Eisenhower was reluctant to authorize more flights into Soviet airspace, but several flights along the border to conduct electronic surveillance provided new valuable intelligence²²

Gary Powers accurately summarized the Soviet overflight program in his book:

Bit by bit, mission after mission, the U-2s were penetrating, and dissipating, a cloud of ignorance which had for decades made the Soviet Union a dark and shadowy land, revealing for the first time a composite picture of military Russia, complete to airfields, atomic production sites, power plants, oil-storage depots, submarine yards, arsenals, railroads, missile factories, launch sites, radar installations, industrial complexes, anti-aircraft defenses. Much later, *The New York Times* would call the U-2 overflights “the most successful reconnaissance, espionage project in history,” while Allen Dulles ... would observe that the U-2 “could collect information with more speed, accuracy, and dependability than could any agent on the ground. In a sense its feats could be equaled only by the acquisition of technical documents directly from Soviet offices and laboratories. The U-2 marked a new high, in more ways than one, in the scientific collection of intelligence.”²³

Along with information about the Soviet military, U-2 image and signal intelligence showed the Soviets' improving ability to track the spy planes' missions²⁴ Soviet leaders objected to the overflights from the beginning of the program²⁵ but did not successfully make their griefs public until one of the planes crashed in Soviet territory. When a SAM shot down the U-2 carrying Gary Powers, Eisenhower faced an international crisis. The U-2 program had operated well for several years, but in 1960, the project's few shortcomings became painfully obvious.

The CIA trained its U-2 pilots extremely well. Powers said, "We flew the U-2 far more than we would have if we'd been in the Air Force and checking out in a new aircraft."²⁶ Since U-2s were not assembly line aircraft, each plane had its own unique quirks. As a result, U-2 pilots were checked out in each individual aircraft.²⁷ Pilots were confident in their flight training. However, these pilots were trained to fly, and they were relatively unprepared for the possibility of capture by foreign governments.

Eisenhower had been assured the plane and pilot could not survive a crash²⁸ and the project's policy and training programs seemed to be based on that assumption. The U-2 was fragile. One plane disintegrated in the wake turbulence of curious Canadian Air Force fighters.²⁹ However, the planes were more resilient than designers thought. The original order of aircraft were expected to last only a year, but actually held up for several. In fact, the very plane Powers was flying during his last mission had previously survived a crash landing in Japan.³⁰

The American response to the downed U-2 was based on the assumption that neither the plane nor pilot survived. Both proved inaccurate. Following the crash, the

Soviets recovered significant portions of Powers' U-2. The plane was equipped with a small explosive charge designed to be manually activated by the pilot in the event of an impending crash. However, the unit was intended only to destroy the craft's cameras and film.³¹ In fact, Kelly Johnson later experimented and discovered that film recovered from a completely burned U-2 might still be usable.³²

The pilots, similarly, were more likely to survive than Eisenhower was led to believe. The U-2 pilots did not know they were not intended to survive a crash over foreign soil. Pilots were issued parachutes and optionally cyanide pills (later poisoned needles).³³ The planes were rigged for escape manually or by ejection seat. Despite these provisions, little attention was given to procedures in the event of a crash.

In the event of capture, pilots were told they "might as well tell the Soviets whatever they wanted to know because they could get the information from [the] aircraft anyway."³⁴ Pilots were not briefed on the prepared CIA cover stories, meaning a surviving pilot would inevitably contradict the cover story.³⁵ This omission would not pose problems if the pilot was killed, but would only augment a crisis if the pilot survived. The plane, similarly, did not seem to be prepared for the event of capture. In standard military style, the U-2's parts were clearly labeled – from the "destructor unit" to the cameras, complete with focal lengths and model numbers.³⁶ The program was not adequately prepared for an incident such as this, and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev leapt at the opportunity the crash provided.

The first engagement in the ensuing battle of rhetoric centered on American attempts to legitimize the U-2 operations. The president received news that Powers had disappeared within the Soviet Union, but no other details were available. Since the U-2

was outside of radio range of American bases, there was no communication from Powers about the cause of the crash or his own status. Operating from the assumption that plane and pilot were destroyed, operation officials issued the cover story that Eisenhower had approved in 1956. NASA claimed the pilot a high-altitude weather plane had experienced with the plane's oxygen system. The plane had perhaps glided into Soviet airspace with an unconscious pilot.³⁷ In a best-case scenario, this story would have worked well. If Powers had used the poison he carried, the effects would have been similar to those caused by loss of oxygen during the flight.³⁸ However, the story slowly fell apart as Khrushchev carefully released details of the crash.

On May 5, 1960, Khrushchev discussed the crash. The Soviet Premier said a spyplane had been shot down in the Soviet Union. He labeled the plane's mission as an "aggressive provocation aimed at wrecking the" upcoming Paris summit.³⁹ No mention was made of the pilot, and Khrushchev stole a page from Eisenhower's playbook.

Khrushchev was already casting the Americans as the aggressors who were trying to destroy hopes of peace. By withholding some information (the status of the plane's pilot), Khrushchev gave American officials the opportunity to reaffirm their cover story. The Soviets even released a fake photo of the crash. The photo showed a plane so badly destroyed that it encouraged American estimation that the pilot could not have survived.⁴⁰ NASA and the State Department again claimed the plane had been on a routine weather mission. Playing into Khrushchev's strategy, a State Department spokesman said "there was no – N-O – deliberate attempt to violate Soviet airspace, and there has never been."⁴¹

After this announcement, Khrushchev completed the first phase of his strategic attack. Khrushchev told the Supreme Soviet, "I must tell you a secret. When I was

making my report, I deliberately did not say that the pilot was and in good health and that we have got parts of the plane. We did so deliberately, because had we told everything a once, the Americans would have invented another version.”⁴² Khrushchev cleverly phrased this revelation. He points out that the Soviets did not lie, but withheld some information. He says the Soviets were forced into this mild deception because of the American tendency to create lies. Khrushchev not only exposed an embarrassing American lie, but also cast the Soviets as morally superior.

Eisenhower was placed in an awkward position. He must either admit to ordering espionage operations against the Soviet Union or claim that he had no control over his administration. The president chose to accept responsibility for the overflights.

Khrushchev continued to play up the event at the Paris summit. He read a long protest and demanded an apology. Despite the obvious passive nature of the intelligence overflights, Khrushchev called them “inexcusable provocation.”⁴³ Although he agreed to end flights over the Soviet Union, Eisenhower refused to apologize. At the summit Eisenhower continued to stress the importance of the intelligence gathering to reducing tensions. Eisenhower made allusions to a planned proposal for a United Nations aerial surveillance program similar to his UN atomic commission proposal.⁴⁴ However, the suggestion was evidently lost in the ensuing Soviet wave of propaganda.

The Soviet leadership had set up a brilliant rhetoric campaign, and American intelligence was still lacking. Administration officials had no indication Powers was alive until just prior to Khrushchev’s announcement. The CIA was not sure Powers had survived the crash until he appeared at his trial. Even then agents questioned his relatives after the trial to be sure the man who had appeared was actually Powers.⁴⁵ American

officials had no clues about the cause of the crash, further hindering efforts to estimate the status of the wreckage. American analysts could only guess how much technology the Soviets had recovered and how much information was revealed by the plane's intelligence equipment. Even after Powers return to the states, many believed the crash was a result of pilot error instead of a Soviet SAM.⁴⁶

Defectors are usually tried *in camera*, away from public view. Trials of captured spies, however, are normally publicized. Powers' trial was no exception. In fact, it was one long propaganda attack on the United States.

The Soviet legal system allowed the Soviets every advantage in their assault Powers and America. The Communist Party selected the prosecutor, defender, and judge. Powers decided to plead guilty, but under Soviet law the trial still had to take place⁴⁷ Powers wanted to refuse to testify, but in that event his interrogation transcripts would have been read into the record. The interrogation transcripts had been presented to Powers in Russian, so he had been unable to verify their accuracy⁴⁸ The Soviet Union's star witness was thus forced to testify, but the Soviets still maintained control of the testimony.

Powers describes the indictment prepared against him:

It was, from the first page to the last, a propaganda attack on the United States. It accepted as fact what was in reality conjecture: that the flight had been sent to wreck the summit talks. It used prejudicial terms such as "gangster flight" and "brazen act of aggression." It quoted in detail the official lies told by the United States before Khrushchev revealed the capture of the pilot and the plane, extraneous material that would [sic] be inadmissible in any Western court. It drew unwarranted conclusions, as when it spoke of my "espionage activities" as "an expression of the aggressive policy pursued by the government of the United States." Once finished reading it, I realized the trial would not be the USSR v. Francis Gary Powers, but the USSR v. the US and, incidentally, Francis Gary Powers.⁴⁹

When he entered the courtroom, Powers observed “This was no courtroom, but an immense theater.”⁵⁰ Crowds had to be turned away at the trial. It was broadcast on Soviet television and shown in movie theaters. Nearly a thousand spectators and a hundred journalists attended and the proceedings were translated into several languages. The trial was choreographed for this international audience. Powers claims his attorney and the presiding judge planned each day’s events to manipulate headlines.⁵¹ For example, the judge adjourned the first day’s proceedings immediately after Powers’ expressions of remorse.

Throughout the trial, the court transcript was altered or rephrased. At one point Powers was asked about his U-2 detachment: “Is this a military detachment?” Powers replied, “Well, it is commanded by military personnel, but the main part of the personnel were civilians.” In the official transcript, Powers’ “well” was changed to “yes.”⁵² Each official involved in the trial seemed to plan proceedings to cast the Soviet Union in the best possible light

The prosecutor’s closing speech offered a good example of the standard Soviet rhetoric surrounding the Powers trial:

The present trial of the American spy-pilot Powers exposes the crimes committed not only by defendant Powers himself, but it completely unmasks the criminal aggressive actions of the United States ruling circles, the actual inspirers and organizers of monstrous crimes directed against the peace and security of the peoples... The Soviet people, the builders of a communist society, are engaged in peaceful creative labor and abhor war... [American leaders] are stubbornly opposing measures for universal disarmament and the destruction of rockets and nuclear weapons.⁵³

Certainly American officials' stance on disarmament had nothing to do with Powers' crimes against the Soviet Union, but the trial was not about Powers. It was about casting the Soviet Union as a peaceful people victimized by the United States. The U.S. actions are dubbed "monstrous," a word that conjures images of Krystallnacht, no aircraft flying 12 miles above Soviet countryside. American officials were "monstrous," "bestial," and "perfidious." They were called a "ruling circle," Powers' "masters," and "rulers."⁵⁴ The image is one of amoral dictators who manipulated Powers for their own gain. Powers was described as "a specially and carefully trained criminal" who was "reared and bred" by American officials. Powers was described as the same breed as the pilots who bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki and as a "newly baked imitator of Hitler."⁵⁵

Even Powers' defense lawyer participated in the attack on America. He asserted Powers was "only a pawn" who was forced into his job by faults in the American system. The defender credited Powers' involvement with the CIA to "mass unemployment in the United States." He claimed Powers "as every other American, was taught to worship the almighty dollar."⁵⁶ Here Powers' criminal actions were attributed to the selfish greed instilled in Americans.

Even after the trial, the Soviet leadership unveiled a few more rhetorical strategies. Powers was not sentenced to death, which was intended to show the peace-loving justice of the Soviets. While in prison, Powers was not required to shave his head as other prisoners were. This made Powers appear well treated in photographs sent back to the United States. This indulgence prompted Powers to remark that the Soviets were "masters of propaganda."⁵⁷ Even Powers' eventual release was manipulated for maximum Soviet advantage. In his memoirs, Khrushchev claims "that by waiting to

release the U-2 pilot Gary Powers until after the American election, we kept Nixon from being able to claim that he could deal with the Russians; our ploy made a difference of at least half a million votes, which gave Kennedy the edge he needed.”⁵⁸ Perhaps the claim is extreme, but it does demonstrate the long-reaching ramifications of the U-2 crash.

Powers summed the Soviet U-2 program this way: “While we overrated the Russians in many ways, we also underrated them in the one area in which they are undisputed masters: propaganda.”⁵⁹ However, it is important to remember this was only one incident. Eisenhower proved his own propaganda abilities several times. The U-2 crises, however, does provide some of the most striking examples of rhetoric by both of the superpowers – first American rhetoric during the Open Skies proposal and later Soviet rhetoric at the Paris summit and during the Powers trial.

The U-2 program provided unprecedented intelligence of the Soviet military establishment, allaying fears and perhaps saving millions of dollars in defense spending. The U-2 project was larger than the Soviet overflight program and was able to weather the political fallout of the Powers crash. After the Powers crash, U-2s continued to operate over other countries, perhaps most significantly over Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis. U-2s are still in use with some modification and they continue to provide valuable intelligence, proving the plane’s usefulness even beyond the Cold War.

Notes

- ¹ G.W. Pedlow, and D.E. Welzenbach, The CIA and the U-2 Program (Central Intelligence Agency, 1998), 39.
- ² Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 20.
- ³ M. Walker, The Cold War (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1995), 133.
- ⁴ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 9.
- ⁵ Walker, 133.
- ⁶ C. Andrew, For the President's Eyes Only (New York, NY: Harper-Collins Publishers, Inc., 1996), 223.
- ⁷ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 108.
- ⁸ Andrew, 222.
- ⁹ Andrew, 146.
- ¹⁰ Andrew, 146.
- ¹¹ M.J. Medhurst, ed., Eisenhower's War of Words (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 111.
- ¹² Medhurst, ed., 147.
- ¹³ D.D. Eisenhower, Waging Peace (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1965), 555.
- ¹⁴ Medhurst, ed., 147
- ¹⁵ Medhurst, ed., 147
- ¹⁶ Medhurst, ed., 147
- ¹⁷ Medhurst, ed., 147
- ¹⁸ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 105.
- ¹⁹ Andrew, 221.
- ²⁰ Andrew, 224.
- ²¹ F.G. Powers, Operation Overflight (New York, NY: Tower Publications Inc., 1970), 59.
- ²² Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 163.
- ²³ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 59-60.
- ²⁴ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 108.
- ²⁵ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 109.
- ²⁶ Powers, 39.
- ²⁷ Powers, 46.
- ²⁸ Andrew, 223.
- ²⁹ Powers, 51.
- ³⁰ Powers, 70.
- ³¹ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 179.
- ³² Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 179.
- ³³ Powers, 53.

³⁴ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 183.

³⁵ Powers, 142.

³⁶ Powers, 139.

³⁷ Pedlow, and Welzenbach, 178.

³⁸ Powers, 187.

³⁹ Powers, 142.

⁴⁰ Powers, 302.

⁴¹ Powers, 142.

⁴² Powers, 143.

⁴³ Eisenhower, 552.

⁴⁴ Eisenhower, 555.

⁴⁵ Powers, 301.

⁴⁶ M.R. Bechloss, *Mayday* (New York, NY: Harper & Rowe, Publishers, Inc.: 1986), 361

⁴⁷ Powers, 153.

⁴⁸ Powers, 108.

⁴⁹ Powers, 158.

⁵⁰ Powers, 163.

⁵¹ Powers, 177.

⁵² Powers, 166.

⁵³ Powers, 189.

⁵⁴ Powers, 189.

⁵⁵ Powers, 190.

⁵⁶ Powers, 192.

⁵⁷ Powers, 217.

⁵⁸ E. Crankshaw, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. S. Talbot (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 498.

⁵⁹ Powers, 372.