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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Advanced Reconnaissance Aircraft

This paper addresses the size of the supersonic (b)(1)1.5g reconnaissance fleet. It recommends a reduction in the total size of the fleet and poses three alternatives for accomplishing the reduction.

Background

We currently have two types of supersonic (b)(1)1.5g reconnaissance aircraft. The first, the OXCART (A-12), developed and operated by the Central Intelligence Agency, represented a major technological break-through. The second, the SR-71, is an improved version developed and operated by the Air Force based on the CIA technology. In July, Mr. Helms, Mr. Vance and I agreed to have a joint study made of the need for the total number of aircraft and the separate fleets. This study, completed last month, shows that:

Thru FY 1966 we have spent over (b)(1)1.5e on the two fleets; an additional (b)(1)1.5e is programmed for the aircraft thru 1972

While there are differences between the aircraft, for operational purposes they are essentially interchangeable.

The two aircraft fleets were initially planned for different purposes:

- the 11 aircraft OXCART fleet as a successor to the U-2 aircraft for covert strategic reconnaissance missions; and,
- the 30 aircraft SR-71 fleet as a high-performance military aircraft with a mission of general war strike reconnaissance.

While these fleets were being developed, we have acquired increased overhead reconnaissance capability through satellite and drone systems.

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A reduced total fleet of 30 aircraft will meet all of the probable mission requirements.

#### General Agreement on Fleet Size

On December 12, Mr. Helms, Mr. Vance, Dr. Hornig and I met to consider the alternatives posed in the report. We are unanimously agreed that:

Retention of the total of 41 aircraft is undesirable since that number of aircraft is more than is necessary to meet all probable mission requirements.

The risk of reducing the total number of aircraft is minimized by the fact that the retired aircraft would be mothballed and could be brought back into the inventory at relatively low cost in the near future should accidents or operational attrition be high.

#### Fleet Reduction Alternatives

The study and subsequent discussions have developed three alternatives for reducing the fleet size, as follows:

1. Retain both the A-12 and SR-71 aircraft with the A-12 fleet under civilian sponsorship at the [REDACTED] reducing the fleet by mothballing 12 SR-71 aircraft. (Estimated savings in 1968, (b)(1)1.5c [REDACTED] five year savings (b)(1)1.5e [REDACTED])
2. Retain only the SR-71 aircraft and assign 8 of them to CIA to be operated from the (b)(1)1.5c [REDACTED] (Estimated savings in 1968, (b)(1)1.5e [REDACTED] five year savings, (b)(1)1.5e [REDACTED])
3. Retain only the SR-71 aircraft at a single base under Air Force management with possible use of some civilian crews for covert missions. (Estimated savings in 1968 (b)(1)1.5e [REDACTED] five year savings, (b)(1)1.5e [REDACTED])

Under alternatives 2 and 3 a minimum of four OXCART aircraft would be retained through December 1967 to provide a year's transitional overlap as the SR-71 fleet becomes fully operational.

Of the three alternatives, Mr. Helms believes that we should retain the A-12 aircraft in a separate fleet under civilian sponsorship and at a separate base (alternative 1) because:

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The potential political problems inherent in a manned overflight of denied territory under military sponsorship would be unacceptable;

Keeping a limited "civilian" mission capability under military sponsorship is not feasible; the story could not be successfully maintained, given the press situation in the United States;

Soviet or Chinese leadership would consider the overflight more provocative if military sponsorship is established;

There is a significant operational advantage in the somewhat greater altitude capability of the A-12 aircraft (about 3,000 feet).

Mr. Vance, Dr. Hornig and I believe that the reconnaissance aircraft operations can be successfully carried out with the SR-71 aircraft and should be consolidated at a single military base (alternative 3). The limited altitude advantage projected for the A-12 is not operationally significant in light of other factors such as the availability of defensive systems and the equal or better range and payload capability of the SR-71. At the speed and altitude of these aircraft, the 3,000 feet or less altitude differential would not significantly affect survivability, even in a sophisticated defensive environment like the Soviet Union.

The value of civilian sponsorship and a separate base are limited because:

Either aircraft could be reasonably attributable to the U.S. military in the event of a shoot-down, since the military version has been officially publicized;

The deployment of a civilian sponsored fleet to advanced bases (as has been proposed for the Southeast Asia mission) would expose and establish the use of a military base;

Civilian pilots could be used under military sponsorship to minimize subjective reactions of alarm on the part of Soviet or Chinese leadership;

The primary provocation from the use of these aircraft over Soviet or Chinese territory is the violation of denied airspace not the fact of military or civilian sponsorship.

Two additional factors support a single base and sponsor:

There is a greater cost saving (b)(1)1.5c in FY 1968 and (b)(1)1.5c over the five-year period).

The operational flexibility of switching aircraft between missions would be somewhat higher under a single command.

#### Discussion with Congressional Committees

A decision to reduce the fleet size through storing either the A-12 or SR-71 aircraft should be discussed with the appropriate congressional leaders (Senator Russell is a key person on this matter). While this matter will have to be handled with care, it should not be a major problem.

#### Recommendations

We recommend your approval of the reduction in the active fleet size. In addition, your decision is needed on the following three alternatives for accomplishing this reduction:

- Alternative 1: Reduce the overall fleet size by mothballing 12 SR-71 aircraft; retaining CIA sponsorship and basing for the A-12 aircraft at (b)(1)1.5c (b)(1)1.5c
- Alternative 2: Reduce the overall fleet size by mothballing 11 A-12 aircraft and transferring 8 operational SR-71 aircraft and 1 trainer to the (b)(1)1.5c (b)(1)1.5c under CIA management.
- Alternative 3: Reduce the overall fleet size by mothballing 11 A-12 aircraft and phase-out the CIA fleet capability by January 1968 with all missions assigned to the SR-71 fleet under Air Force management with the possible use of civilian crews.

Mr. Holms recommends Alternative 1; Mr. Vance, Dr. Hornig and I recommend Alternative 3.

I: CWFischer;

12-26-66