

2002

Review: Spyplane: The U-2 History Declassified

David Lindsey Snead
Liberty University, dlsnead@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/hist_fac_pubs



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Snead, David Lindsey, "Review: Spyplane: The U-2 History Declassified" (2002). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 13.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/hist_fac_pubs/13

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

Spyplane: The U-2 History Declassified

David L Snead

1 January 2002

[Journal of Military History](#) PJMH 264

Volume 66, Issue 1; ISSN: 0899-3718

Spyplane: The U-2 History Declassified. By Norman Polmar. Osceola, Wis.: MBI Publishing, 2001. ISBN 0-7603-0957-4. Photographs. Appendixes. Notes. Index. Pp. x, 278. \$21.95. Available at website www.motorbooks.com.

The U-2 spy plane played a vital role in the Cold War and other crises during the second half of the twentieth century. For a brief, but seminal period, it obtained intelligence that Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy used to make wise decisions. Norman Polmar's **Spyplane: The U-2 History Declassified** comes closer than any previous study to capturing the importance of this plane in waging the Cold War.

Polmar sets out to provide as complete a history of the U-2 program as possible. At most levels, he succeeds. He opens with a brief introduction to early U.S. efforts to acquire aerial intelligence and describes the growing desire within the American government for a spy plane that could photograph the Soviet Union while remaining invulnerable to its defenses. The real strength of Polmar's discussion is his analysis of the technical development of the U-2 program. He provides the technical specifications of each version of the U-2 as well as descriptions of the camera equipment they carried. Additionally, he discusses the history of each U-2 flight.

While the U-2's history is generally known, Polmar provides details that have never previously been disclosed. He shows how the CIA and Air Force used the U-2 to photograph numerous countries and concludes that these flights influenced U.S. policies by disproving the existence of bomber and missile gaps, revealing the presence of missile sites in Cuba, and clarifying activities in the Middle East. While this information is not new to the scholarly community, Polmar presents it in detail unseen before.

For all of its strengths, Polmar's book suffers from a few problems. He sometimes glosses over analysis of the U-2's impact on decision makers. He argues "the overflights provided President Eisenhower and his advisors with unambiguous intelligence" (p. 3). From Eisenhower's perspective this was probably true, but many of his advisors remained unsure of Soviet capabilities. In reality, the U-2's coverage of the Soviet Union was limited. Polmar could have strengthened his arguments by more carefully examining the actual use of the U-2 intelligence. Furthermore, he accuses the CIA of misleading and lying to the president about the Soviet Union's ability to detect, track, and shoot down a U-2. While Polmar does show that the CIA sometimes gave the president inaccurate information, he is less convincing in arguing the deception was deliberate. His own evidence seems to indicate that the CIA did clarify the plane's vulnerability, as it became known.

Despite these relatively minor shortcomings, Polmar's book is a major addition to our understanding of intelligence gathering during the Cold War. It definitely belongs on the

bookshelf next to the works of William Burrows, Lawrence Freedman, John Prados, and Jeffrey Richelson.

David L. Snead

Texas Tech University Lubbock, Texas