

Commentary

Who serves the public interest?

The events and situations unveiled in this week's cover article hardly constitute one of the more uplifting episodes in the recent history of the relationship of government, technology and society. Most criticism involving technology in recent years, much of it reported in this magazine, has been aimed at what is often perceived to be overzealous, unwise, or premature application of certain new technological capabilities. In contrast, the subject of the investigation by aerospace editor Everly Driscoll involves a series of security-classification and bureaucratic obstacles to the beneficial application of a new capability—in this case a topographic mapping camera—for civilian scientific purposes. As a National Academy of Sciences committee notes with frustration, use of the camera system in civilian aircraft and satellites could, among other things, "provide development of cartographic techniques of great potential scientific and economic benefit." Further delay "will be to the detriment of the fields of cartography and geodesy and severely and unnecessarily constrain the value of important earth resources survey programs."

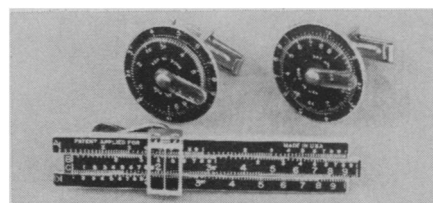
The rationale for the camera system was developed by civilian scientists for civilian purposes. Yet that defender of democratic ideals, the Department of Defense, has over the years posed an endless series of impediments to scientific use of the camera system and, in fact, has now taken the system over altogether for use in a spy satellite next year.

The cloak of secrecy laid over space camera systems by DOD has itself obscured public knowledge of the extent of DOD policies in delaying use of remote sensors for the good of society. The general problem has been known to scientists involved in earth observations programs, but documented details have been slow to emerge into view of a wider audience. In its selfless zeal for protecting the public interest and in its typically restrained exercise of its powers to classify information, the DOD has, for instance, classified not only the limit it places on the angular resolution of photographs taken from space by the mapping cameras of civilian agencies but also the very fact that it has such a limitation policy.

The tragedy for the public is that the case described in our article constitutes only a small fraction of the extent to which Defense Department influence has acted to hinder the development and use of remote sensing techniques for peaceful civilian purposes. Numerous scientists and administrators of our acquaintance have, in less guarded moments, described other examples of similar intrusions, but for various reasons have not felt free to speak out in public.

To be sure, budgetary and international political constraints also have played a role in delaying remote earth-resources observations; the sensitivities of other nations should be carefully and judiciously considered. But most thoughtful persons will not be persuaded that a policy is in the public interest which allows use of camera systems to monitor the military installations of other countries but prohibits their use—even over just the United States—in laying a cartographic base for badly needed civilian surveys of earth resources.

—KENDRICK FRAZIER



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