

# AFTER TITAN: KEEPING SECRETS THESE DAYS ISN'T EASY

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The National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) is a U.S. agency that oversees the construction and operation of several expensive, sophisticated and allegedly "top secret" spy satellites.

So much for secrets in the age of the Internet.

Although NRO spokesmen said virtually nothing about the \$700 million to \$800 million satellite that blew up last week in the Titan IVA explosion at Cape Canaveral Air Station, Fla., John Pike of the Federation of American Scientists and other experts supplied numerous details, which the NRO has neither confirmed nor denied. But the data appears to be accurate, government sources have said privately.

Pike told Space Business News that a so-called Mercury signal-intelligence satellite, one of several developed by the Air Force, was the payload that blew up with the Titan. The Mercury uses a mammoth antenna, which has a diameter of 328 feet, to intercept broadcast transmissions.

Pike said the satellite was the third of three Mercury spacecraft. Other experts added that the satellite probably was intended to monitor troublespots including India, Pakistan, the Middle East and Russia.

Under new boss Keith Hall, the NRO has attempted to be more open in discussing aspects of its mission but draws the line when satellites go up. The NRO's silence, however, clearly is not enough to keep the Mercury in the dark.

## NRO At A Glance

Established in the 1960s to build and operate spy satellites.

Accused by Congress in the mid-1990s of mishandling funds and underwent a major shake-up.

Got a new director in 1996 when Keith Hall took over. Hall also is the assistant secretary for space for the Air Force.



Source: SBN Files

Question: Are the satellites considered male or female?

Answer: When they are working, they're neutral; when they fail, they're female.  
But then I'll bet you already figured that one out--considering most engineers are male.

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