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### IUFO: (Fwd) NRO Satellite Launch

From: "Steve Wingate" <swingate@crl.com>  
Date: Thu, 19 Dec 1996 06:19:41 -0800  
Fwd Date: Fri, 20 Dec 1996 10:08:00 -0500  
Subject: IUFO: (Fwd) NRO Satellite Launch

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----- Forwarded Message Follows -----

From: rlawler@dfw.net (Rick Lawler)  
Subject: SNETNEWS: NRO Satellite Launch  
To: snetnews@world.std.com  
Date: Wed, 18 Dec 1996 23:34:57 -0600 (CST)  
Reply-to: snetnews@world.std.com

U.S. lifts veil on spy satellite launch, 12/18/96

WASHINGTON (Reuter) - A supersecretive Pentagon arm Wednesday lifted the veil for the first time on the scheduled launch of a U.S. spy satellite in what it called a major step toward greater openness. But the payload and its mission remain classified.

The National Reconnaissance Office, whose own very existence was a secret until 1992, said it would no longer seek to shield the fact of a launch because doing so was costly and unnecessary for U.S. national security.

The maiden announced launch of a U.S. spy satellite was to take place Friday from Vandenberg Air Force Base, 55 miles north of Santa Barbara, California, the NRO said. It said the launch vehicle was a Titan IV, the largest unmanned booster in the U.S. space launch inventory.

The launch period opens at 11:30 A.M. EST and extends until 1:00 P.M. EST.

``This event is the first time the U.S. government has acknowledged, in advance, the launch of a reconnaissance satellite,'' the NRO said in a statement.

``We've been doing this for 35 years,'' added Katherine Schneider, an NRO spokeswoman. She said it was tough to keep secret a satellite ``that's sitting on top of a very large launch vehicle.''

``What we want to protect is the technology,'' she said, acknowledging that the fact that the NRO and the Air Force were launching spy satellites from Vandenberg and Cape Canaveral Air Station, Florida, was well known to anyone interested.

Continuing to try to keep it a secret ``was costing us money and it was costing us a lot of frustration in a new and more open environment,'' Schneider said. But she said the NRO would

not disclose for now the mission of the satellite being launched Friday nor declassify details of the ``well over 300'' such launches since 1959, when so-called Corona satellites gave the United States its first eyes in space. Other than Corona satellites, the last of which was launched from Vandenberg on May 25, 1972, all NRO launches remain classified.

John Pike, who heads the Space Policy Project at the Federation of American Scientists, a policy research group based in Washington, said the new policy inaugurated Wednesday would save taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars per launch in wasted security costs.

Pike said the money was wasted because experts like he could always figure out what was being launched, partly by looking at launch windows. He estimated that the NRO had spent many tens of billions on security in its 35-year existence.

He said Friday's payload was no doubt an Advanced Keyhole optical imaging intelligence satellite of a type that lets U.S. photo-interpreters monitor, within minutes, such things as compliance with arms control agreements, Iraqi troop movements and the status of North Korean nuclear weapons facilities.

Disclosing the fact of the launch was long overdue, added Steven Aftergood, director of the Federation of American Scientists' Project on government secrecy.

``It was in any case a non-secret since launches like this cannot be concealed from anybody who is interested in following them. So its a step toward sanity,'' Aftergood said.

end

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