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Sniffer Plane Secrets and Political Courage

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In the book *Voodoo Science*¹ Robert Parks describes the "Sniffer Plane" incident by the French government in 1976. This government spent \$200 million for a secret instrument claimed to be able to spot mineral and oil reserves from the air by measuring a new particle. French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing ordered tight secrecy on the program to keep the technological advantage. Officials didn't even get close to the device because of dangerous radiation warnings that were issued.

Getting suspicious, the French had a prominent physicist examine the device. It was found to be an elaborate hoax that was able to survive 3 years under the cloak of secrecy and national security. After the government had determined it was a fake, they shut the operation down but kept its existence secret because of political embarrassment. In 1981 a new government took over and stumbled across the cover-up.

This story exemplifies the process I shall dub *Sniffer Plane Secrecy*. *It applies when governments keep things secret, not necessarily for national security, but for political expediency and to prevent public scrutiny.*

National Missile Defense as Sniffer Plane Genre

The United States is not immune to this type of secrecy and the instances of it appear to be rising. There are numerous multi-billion dollar programs that the United States is undertaking that have a striking resemblance to the *Sniffer Plane*. Consider George W. Bush's plan to build a national missile defense shield (NMD). The missile defense program has spent 70.7 billion dollars from 1984 to 1994 without any deployable system or technological advancement.² Billions of dollars are being spent each year for the program. Many missile interceptor tests have required a homing beacon to be placed into the target missile and - even with this beacon - many of the tests fail to intercept the target.³

The Union of Concerned Scientists clearly state that the program is "unworkable" and "counterproductive."⁴ The Defense Department has recently moved to restrict access to information about future tests and costs.⁵ Thereby removing it from public scrutiny and turning it into a *Sniffer Plane Secret*.

Ted Postol, physicist and MIT Professor - formerly a U.S. Navy scientist, has been so bold as to declare the NMD a "fraud" and that a cover-up was happening.^{6,7} In the past, Postol declared the Patriot Missiles almost a complete failure when the Pentagon was declaring them 90% effective. It has been determined the Patriot's were a lot less effective than the Pentagon indicated.

Aurora as Sniffer Plane

Another such secret is the Aurora plane. It is (maybe) a classified plane that the U.S. government will neither confirm or deny exists. The secrecy is almost laughable since a model airplane company has sold kits for its construction.⁸ Carl Sagan discusses this plane in his book *The Demon Haunted World*.⁹

The plane is estimated to have a speed of greater than Mach 4 and can fly at an altitude of 200,000 ft (38 miles). It is a successor to the SR-71 Blackbird spy plane. The Federation of American Scientist (FAS) web pages at <<http://www.fas.org/irp/mystery/aurora.htm>> estimate the plane's development cost to be between 4.4 and 8 billion dollars. Building 24 Aurora planes is expected to cost about 10 and 24 billion dollars. *An intelligent debate about the costs verses benefits is stifled under the cloak of secrecy.* With spy satellites and the notion that any capable U.S. foe has probably developed effective counter-measures to the plane, it is hard to fathom why it is kept secret other than to protect a giant boondoggle.

Political Sniffer Planes

In 1997 a congressional commission¹⁰ reported “*Excessive secrecy has significant consequences for the national interest when, as a result, policymakers are not fully informed, government is not held accountable for its actions, and the public cannot engage in informed debate... The classification system, for example, is used too often to deny the public an understanding of the policymaking process, rather than for the necessary protection of intelligence activities and other highly sensitive matters.*” President George W. Bush issued an executive order¹¹ in November, 2001, to limit the disclosure of presidential records just as information about President Reagan and Vice President George H.W. Bush was to be made public. It is easy to see how conspiracy and cover-up theories flourish in this age of secrecy.

President Nixon argued not to release Whitehouse tapes because it wouldn't be in the *national interest*. These tapes revealed crimes against our nation perpetrated by the president. They also revealed the potential truth about conspiracies. Shortly after Arthur Bremer tried to assassinate George Wallace in 1972, Nixon decided to concoct a scheme to blame the event on supporters of Democrats George McGovern and Edward Kennedy. The tapes revealed Nixon saying “*Just say he (the shooter) was a supporter of McGovern and Kennedy...Now, just put that out!...Just say you have it on unmistakable evidence.*”¹² One can only imagine what crime was recorded on the erased sections of the Nixon tapes. More recently and a bit less egregious, we have President Bill Clinton attempting to circum-navigate justice by declaring he did not have a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

The U.S. has a wide variety of “Intelligence” agencies. Two of the most prominent are the National Security Agency and the Central Intelligence Agency. Their budgets are not disclosed but the total intelligence budget is estimated at about \$27 billion dollars annually.¹³ Cost effectiveness of these agencies is as much a mystery as their activities. Much of what is known about these agencies comes from books published in the popular media. These include *Body of Secrets* by James Bamford,¹⁴ *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA* by Bob Woodward,¹⁵ and *The U.S. Intelligence Community* by Jeffrey Richelson.¹⁶ These agencies do have some merit but, as indicated in these books, many abuses have occurred under the cloak of secrecy for national interest.

Sniffer Plane Secrets as an Affront to Science and Society

Secrecy does have a role for protecting the national interest. For example, the security plan for protecting Vice President Cheney on his visit to the 2002 Winter Olympics should be kept secret. (Such plans were accidentally left in a souvenir shop by a secret service agent.¹⁷) But secrecy can tear apart the very fabric of society and science. The U.S. government has withdrawn¹⁸ over 6,000 documents from shelves and web pages pertaining to or even remotely connected to germ and chemical weapons. Ronald M. Atlas, the president-elect of the American Society of Microbiology, was quoted as saying "(it) *takes apart the whole foundation of science...I think it undermines science.*" In the wake of September 11, the Pentagon tried to establish the Office of Strategic Influence. Its purpose was to influence public sentiment in foreign countries by providing news items – possibly false news items or propaganda!¹⁹ About two weeks after the office was established, the Bush Administration closed the office due to public criticism. This leads one to ask how many other governments around the world have such an office which is kept secret and out of the reach of public scrutiny. Truth and openness is vital for healthy governance and strong science.²⁰ As Mark Twain has stated "Truth is the most valuable thing we have, let us economize it."

Solutions to Sniffer Plane Secrecies

The world needs an antidote to cynicism – the consequence of *Sniffer Plane Secrets*. Producing workable solutions is formidable. The most important solution is to encourage our political leaders to be honest and open. Our nation needs to recognize and reward such courage. The recent book *Profiles in Courage for Our Time*²¹ edited and introduced by Carolyn Kennedy, acknowledges those that have labored admirably in the political arena. One essay in this book is about Russell Feingold and John McCain for their courageous efforts to reform campaign financing. It chronicles the strategic maneuvering by special interest to keep their hold on American politics and stifle the McCain-Feingold reform effort. A total of 160 million dollars were given to political campaigns in 2001 to advance the agendas of special interests.²² The biggest special interests include Securities and Investments, Telecommunications, Labor, Insurance, Lawyers, and Pharmaceuticals.²³ The people of the United States can be proud of McCain and Feingold for their principled determination on this issue!

There exists another surprising way in which to rout out *Sniffer Plane Secrets*. When government officials see classified documents that are blatant abuses of power, it can be argued that exposing the abuses by leaking the information to the press is a patriotic act. Robert Parks (which brings us back to the author of *Voodoo Science*) discusses this issue by stating "...but conscientious government employees who are willing to risk their careers by leaking classified documents may be the only check on government excesses carried out behind the screen of national security."²⁴

As our nation rallies to fight terrorism, it is important to recognize the acts of bravery and sacrifice of soldiers on the battlefield. It is also important to recognize acts of courage from our political leaders because it is these acts that make our nation and its institutions worthy of wartime sacrifices.

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