



PROJECT MUSE®

Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair (review)

Christopher J. Littel

SAIS Review, Volume 7, Number 1, Winter-Spring 1987, pp. 239-240 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.1987.0041>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/434770/summary>

is not currently economically feasible, in the future seabed deposits may prove to be a significant source of some of the minerals discussed. On the whole, however, Maull provides a sound analysis of resources and Western security and gives worthwhile suggestions for managing the risks involved.

Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair. By Michael Beschloss. New York: Harper and Row, 1986. 401 pp. \$19.95/cloth.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Littel, M.A. candidate, SAIS.

In the preface to *Mayday* Michael Beschloss states that the U-2 incident "deserves renewed attention because of the light it sheds on U.S.-Soviet diplomacy and other battles being fought in our own day." Given the roller coaster path of superpower relations over the past three years, Beschloss's book could not have come at a better time. *Mayday* is an insightful and analytical attempt to place the U-2 incident of 1 May 1960 in a clearer historical perspective; his reconstruction of the history of the U-2 program clearly identifies the underlying assumptions of the postwar U.S. strategy toward the Soviet Union.

Beschloss has two basic premises: first, the intelligence community—particularly CIA director Allen Dulles—was determined to prevent another strategic surprise attack like the bombing of Pearl Harbor and sought to use the surveillance capabilities of the U-2 as part of this defensive strategy; and second, despite president Eisenhower's tightfisted management of the program, bureaucratic politics and inadequate supervision were partly responsible for the president's actions in April 1960, when Ike became "a bit careless with success." Beschloss further argues that none of Eisenhower's top aides shared either his priorities or his optimism that détente "would or should be established."

On the Soviet side, the author portrays Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev as an outspoken, volatile, and inconsistent leader who usually angered his own party members more than his U.S. counterparts. Beschloss does maintain, with some credulity, that Khrushchev was also a "leader with an extraordinary sense of vulnerability" who genuinely sought better relations with the United States.

On balance, the author's analysis is thoughtful and detailed. He argues that "involving the public can strengthen the conduct of foreign policy," a popular notion, but not one supported by the circumstances of the U-2 incident. Beschloss is, moreover, a master of integrating the factual and the dramatic, portraying the spy plane's pilot, Gary Powers, as a pawn in a larger game of global chess.

The real story of the U-2 affair, not lost on the author, is how governments respond in crisis situations. Although Beschloss criticizes Eisenhower's improvisatory approach to damage control, perhaps it was and still is the most appropriate model for crisis management. As Beschloss indicates in his conclusion, uncertainty often fuels speculation.

It is perhaps less important how Power's aircraft was downed than the impact the event had on the actors involved. In Beschloss's words, "The U-2 was a flaming javelin unwittingly thrown into the dry forest of suspicions and

misperceptions that surrounded American-Soviet affairs of the period." Beschloss has made an important contribution to the conduct of U.S. foreign policy with a thorough discussion of all parties involved in this exercise in diplomatic sensitivity.