

# October 1957 Memorandum Related to Sputnik

Missy McNatt and David Trill

On October 5, 1957, the headline on the front page of the *Baltimore News-Post* proclaimed “RUSS ‘MOON’ CIRCLING EARTH.” Beneath it, the newspaper asked readers, “Horror or Progress?” The article that followed, written by International News Service Science writer Edwin Diamond, began: “A new moon circles today in the earth’s heavens, placed there by Soviet scientists to open the space age. What is its meaning? ... **The consensus of scientists close to the space program seems to be if Russia can place a moon in space, it can place an ICBM anywhere on earth.**” (Emphasis is from the article).

The “Russ” Moon was Sputnik I, launched by the Soviet Union a day earlier. The launch had far-reaching and unexpected outcomes for the United States. Almost immediately, President Dwight D. Eisenhower called a meeting with key officials from the defense and scientific communities to discuss its ramifications. The featured document is the Memorandum of Conference with the President that occurred on October 8, 1957, submitted by Brigadier General Andrew Jackson Goodpaster, staff secretary and defense liaison, on October 9. The two-page memorandum was stamped SECRET, and was not declassified until November 17, 1976, nearly 20 years later. That the meeting was considered “Secret” suggests the Eisenhower administration’s strong desire to avoid sending signals to the public that Washington viewed Sputnik I as a crisis in the making.

The list of those present at the 40-minute meeting conveyed a “Who’s Who” of top scientists working for the government and included Donald Quarles, deputy secretary of defense for research and

development; Dr. Alan T. Waterman, first director of the U.S. National Science Foundation; Dr. John P. Hagen, director of Vanguard Project; William M. Holaday [*sic*], special assistant to the secretary of defense for guided missiles; Sherman Adams, former governor of New Hampshire and White House chief of staff; General Wilton Persons, deputy assistant to the president; James Hagerty, White House press secretary; Howard Pyle, former governor of Arizona, and executive branch liaison; Bryce N. Harlow, speech writer and congressional liaison; General Robert Cutler, special assistant to the president for national security affairs; and General Andrew J. Goodpaster, staff secretary and defense liaison.

Despite the alarming newspaper headlines, according to the memorandum, Eisenhower approached the meeting calmly, and with methodical and precise questions regarding the status of the United States satellite program. He inquired whether the Army missile program, Redstone, or the Navy program,

Vanguard, was capable of launching a satellite. Another area of concern for the president was whether or not the signals sent by Sputnik I could convey coded reconnaissance information. Even with the tough questions posed by the president and the uncertain answers provided by the attending scientists, the message of the meeting was clear: President Eisenhower had no intention of making dramatic changes to the existing American space program.

Although the conference between Eisenhower and top scientific and defense officials was stamped secret, the launch of Sputnik I was no secret. Tass, the official Soviet news agency of the Soviet Union, had proudly announced the successful launch and orbit of Sputnik I in *Pravda* on October 5, 1957. Sputnik, Russian for “fellow traveler,” was launched by a rocket into an elliptical orbit around the Earth at about 8,000 meters per second. It completed an orbit of the Earth once every 98 minutes and traveled about

*continued on page 336*

## Note about the Document

The featured memorandum is in the holdings of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas. Both of its pages are available online through the National Archives Archival Research Catalog (ARC), identifier number 186623, at [www.archives.gov/research/arc/index.html](http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/index.html).

~~SECRET~~

October 9, 1957

MEMORANDUM OF CONFERENCE WITH THE PRESIDENT  
October 8, 1957, 8:30 AM

Others present: Secretary Quarles  
Dr. Waterman  
Mr. Hagen  
Mr. Holaday  
Governor Adams  
General Persons  
Mr. Hagerty  
Governor Pyle  
Mr. Harlow  
General Cutler  
General Goodpaster



Secretary Quarles began by reviewing a memorandum prepared in Defense for the President on the subject of the earth satellite (dated October 7, 1957). He left a copy with the President. He reported that the Soviet launching on October 4th had apparently been highly successful.

The President asked Secretary Quarles about the report that had come to his attention to the effect that Redstone could have been used and could have placed a satellite in orbit many months ago. Secretary Quarles said there was no doubt that the Redstone, had it been used, could have orbited a satellite a year or more ago. The Science Advisory Committee had felt, however, that it was better to have the earth satellite proceed separately from military development. One reason was to stress the peaceful character of the effort, and a second was to avoid the inclusion of materiel, to which foreign scientists might be given access, which is used in our own military rockets. He said that the Army feels it could erect a satellite four months from now if given the order -- this would still be one month prior to the estimated date for the Vanguard. The President said that when this information reaches the Congress, they are bound to ask why this action was not taken. He recalled,

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E.O. 11652, Sec. 11

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MR 76-49 DOCUMENT #65  
By J.W. Date 11-17-76

SECRET

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however, that timing was never given too much importance in our own program, which was tied to the IGY and confirmed that, in order for all scientists to be able to look at the instrument, it had to be kept away from military secrets. Secretary Quarles pointed out that the Army plan would require some modification of the instrumentation in the missile.

He went on to add that the Russians have in fact done us a good turn, unintentionally, in establishing the concept of freedom of international space -- this seems to be generally accepted as orbital space, in which the missile is making an inoffensive passage.

The President asked what kind of information could be conveyed by the signals reaching us from the Russian satellite. Secretary Quarles said the Soviets say that it is simply a pulse to permit location of the missile through radar direction finders. Following the meeting, Dr. Waterman indicated that there is some kind of modulation on the signals, which may mean that some coding is being done, although it might conceivably be accidental.


The President asked the group to look ahead five years, and asked about a reconnaissance vehicle. Secretary Quarles said the Air Force has a research program in this area and gave a general description of the project.

Governor Adams recalled that Dr. Pusey had said that we had never thought of this as a crash program, as the Russians apparently did. We were working simply to develop and transmit scientific knowledge. The President thought that to make a sudden shift in our approach now would be to belie the attitude we have had all along. Secretary Quarles said that such a shift would create service tensions in the Pentagon. Mr. Holaday said he planned to study with the Army the back up of the Navy program with the Redstone, adapting it to the instrumentation.

There was some discussion concerning the Soviet request as to whether we would like to put instruments of ours aboard one of their satellites. He said our instruments would be ready for this. Several present pointed out that our instruments contain parts which, if made available to the Russians, would give them substantial technological information.



SECRET

  
A. J. Goodpaster  
Brigadier General, USA

**1. Focus or Preview Activity**

Divide the class into groups of six to eight students. Choose one student in each group to assume the role of President Eisenhower, which the other students in each group assume the roles of scientific and defense advisors to the president. Assign one student in each group to take notes.

Explain to the students that the date is October 8, 1957, and President Eisenhower has called a meeting to discuss the recent launch of Sputnik I by the Soviet Union. Give the students the following information: The launch of Sputnik was a momentous event because it was the first time that a man-made object was successfully launched into orbit. The event received significant media coverage, and increased concerns Americans had about the ability of the Soviet Union to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Ask the student assuming the role of President Eisenhower to lead the meeting and ask questions of the students assuming the roles of advisors. Instruct the students to meet for 10 minutes. After 10 minutes, ask one member of each group to summarize his or her group's discussion for the class.

**2. Document Analysis**

Provide students with a copy of the featured document. Ask a volunteer to read it aloud while others follow along. Lead a class discussion with the following questions:

- What type of document is it?
- When was it created?
- Who created it?
- Why was the document written?
- Why is the document's date important?
- What is the tone of the document?
- Why was it classified?
- When was it declassified?

Encourage the students to compare the tone and content of the featured document with the tone and content of their brief meetings in activity #1.

**3. Research and Compare/Contrast**

Working individually or in groups, instruct the students to complete a close reading of the Memorandum of Conference, noting the calm reaction of the officials to the launching of Sputnik I. Direct the students to research contemporary magazines and newspaper articles that describe how others reacted to the launching of Sputnik I. Using a Venn diagram or other graphic organizer, instruct students to compare and

contrast the reactions. Lead a class discussion comparing the information generated by the research and the close reading.

**4. Guest Speaker**

Invite colleagues or community members who remember the Sputnik launch and the American responses to speak to your class about their experiences. Assign your students to generate questions ahead of time so that they are well prepared. Share the featured document with the guest speakers, and ask them if the Memorandum of Conference with the President reflects their memories of the launch of Sputnik.

**5. Create a Timeline**

Divide the class into six groups. Assign each group one of the decades between 1950 and 2007. Direct student groups to research the U.S. and Soviet/Russian space programs during their assigned decade. Ask students to identify the most significant events that occurred and list them on the board in chronological order, creating a timeline visible to the entire class.

**6. Research and Writing Activity**

Assign students to research and write an essay about what the United States government did in response to the launch of Sputnik and what motivated the responses. Encourage students to share their essays with the class. Lead a class discussion based on the students' essays.

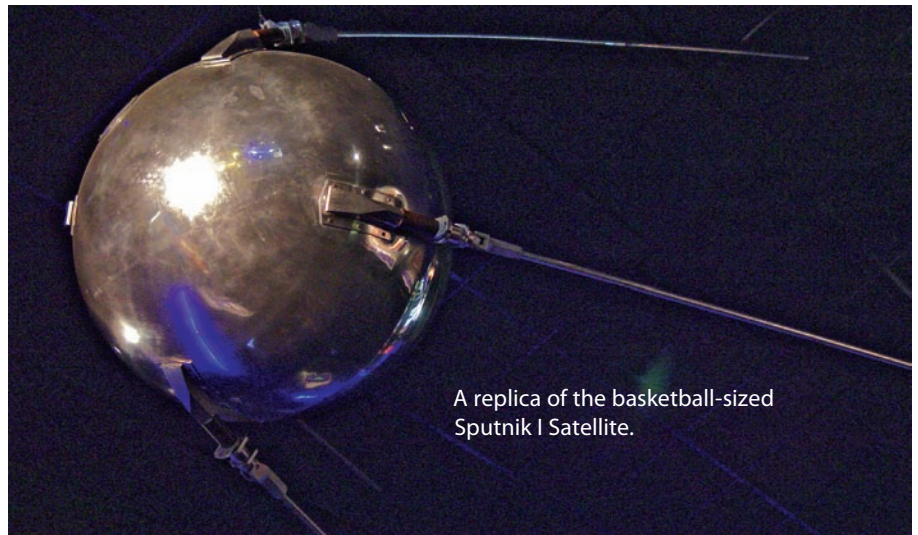
**7. Historical Perspective Research and Class Discussion**

October 4, 2007, was the fiftieth anniversary of the launch of Sputnik I by the Soviet Union. Encourage students to investigate newspapers, magazines, and news programs. Focus a class discussion around the question: How is the launch of Sputnik viewed 50 years after the event? 🌐

900 kilometers above the surface of the Earth. Sputnik was about the size of a basketball and weighed 184 pounds. It had no scientific instruments, but had a radio transmitter that emitted a constant signal for tracking purposes.

The concern Eisenhower and the officials at the meeting experienced did not stem from a great scientific advance on the part of the Soviet Union. The Eisenhower administration was aware of the imminent launch of the first Soviet satellite. The first launchings of the satellites by the Soviet Union had been announced in 1955 and planned as part of the scientific research program of the International Geophysical Year (July 1957-December 1958). Rather, the concerns expressed at the meeting were the result of the increasing competition in high technology with the Soviet Union, a competition that had begun in the waning days of World War II. A series of adverse events, including the Berlin crisis, the Berlin airlift, the Soviet development of the atom bomb and explosion of a hydrogen bomb, and the Soviet crackdown on Hungary in 1956, had increased the rivalry between the two superpowers. Then, on October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union had demonstrated the ability to launch a satellite; the core alarming implication was that, as the *Baltimore News-Post* suggested, the Soviets now had a means for delivering a hydrogen bomb in the form of a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), a delivery mechanism dramatically more difficult to counter than Soviet long-range bombers.

Americans from across the nation quickly understood the implication. Eisenhower received letters and tele-



A replica of the basketball-sized Sputnik I Satellite.

grams from citizens of all ages. A current events class from Leavenworth Junior High School in Leavenworth, Kansas, raised \$17.25 for the missile program. The check was dated January 9, 1958, and signed by the principal of the school. On November 3, 1957, the Upsilon Alpha Chapter of the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity at the University of Arizona sent a telegram to the White House donating “The Services of Our Dog Cosmo for Space Travel in the United States of America’s First Satellite.” Sandy Eichschlag, age 16, of St. Louis, Missouri, wrote to Eisenhower on October 9, 1957, about the Sputnik “crisis.” She ended her letter with a plea: “I hope that Congress is not pushing this problem into a cubby hole for further recognition, for we must act now before it is too late.”

The federal government did take action. In the summer of 1958, Congress passed two significant pieces of legislation: the National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958 and the National Defense Education Act of 1958. The former was

received by the White House on July 15, sent to the Office of Management and Budget for review, given a favorable recommendation on July 26, and signed into law on July 29. The latter bill went through the same process even more quickly; it was received by the White House on August 25, reviewed and recommended by the OMB by September 1 and signed by President Eisenhower on September 2. 📄

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