

Nuclear Space Secrecy—An Outdated Policy

If secrecy on nuclear space projects made no sense a year ago (when NUCLEONICS carried an editorial criticizing this policy), it makes even less sense in the world of today. Because of budgetary and other considerations, work on practical flight hardware for the major nuclear space projects (Rover and the Rankine-cycle SNAP reactors) has been stopped and current efforts on these programs are limited to developing basic technology. At this same time, as a nation we feel secure enough with our defense posture to cut back in our production of fissionable material and long range missiles.

In view of these developments, the argument that declassification of our nuclear space programs involves a risk of any consequence to the national security becomes increasingly difficult to support.

In fact, Edward Teller—one of the most vocal advocates in the country for a strong national defense—recently urged a general loosening of secrecy on all research and development projects on the grounds that we are hurting ourselves more than we are hurting the Russians by denying our civilian industry information about advances in technology. Especially pertinent is his criticism of the current practice of keeping information classified until it can be proven beyond a doubt that making it public will not harm the national interest. We can only concur with his proposal that “the burden of proof should be on the other side.”

This should particularly apply to the nuclear space program which is now confronted with difficult technical problems. As is always the case in research and development, the more people who are exposed to the existence of a challenging problem the greater the likelihood of an early solution being found. Classification shuts people out and discourages interest.

Another important argument in favor of declassification is that the work being done is subject to the healthy examination and criticism of the technical community.

In defense of classification policies on nuclear space projects, the Atomic Energy Commission insists that only a small part of these projects is classified. It is claimed, for instance, that on the SNAP reactor programs all but 2% of the information is unrestricted. If this is so, then all the more reason for moving quickly to declassify the remaining 2%, for we are paying an enormous price in terms of restrictions on free communication to protect such a minuscule amount of information. Government agencies, perhaps, too easily forget that a single classified word can keep a secrecy stamp on a 200-page report or prevent the author of a paper from presenting it at an open conference. Even if he is able to delete what he believes to be the offensive words, the author must still submit his work to the onerous process of classification review—a business few researchers have time or taste for.

Now, with the changes in the SNAP and Rover programs, would be a good time to make a clean break with this tiresome and outdated policy of classification—a policy whose only certain result has been that of hindering our own efforts.