The People of SAFSP

SAFSP accomplishments are remarkable particularly in the context of history, mission requirements, technology of the time, but above all, because of the effort of those who made it a success. Global tension of Cold War threatened Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) in the 1960s through 1980s. Schools held "duck & cover" drills for which children were told to hide under their desks, and family bomb shelters became popular. This threat was to our homeland, but we couldn't know what we didn't know when overflights of the USSR were halted in 1960 after our U-2 was shot down. America's first successful satellite was Explorer-1 launched in January 1958 but less than three years later we were collecting strategic intelligence with satellites developed and operated by SAFSP. We pushed emerging technology to develop greater capability than an enemy thought possible while maintaining the highest security restricting information to the minimum number of individuals with an absolute need to know for programs not publicly disclosed.

Those selected to support these programs were chosen by name based on their technical expertise, then were subjected to months of extensive security screening to verify integrity and were given longer assignments to ensure continuity. The existence of SAFSP missions conducted in 1970-1990 were not publicly disclosed until 2011. A monument commemorating the accomplishments of these people who, for nearly half a century, took pride in missions they could not divulge is scheduled to be dedicated at the Air Force Museum in May 2026.

This was an era of slide rule engineering when room size state-of-the-art computers had less computing power than a smartwatch. Technical issues for operating satellites in space were being defined while critical technology was being developed for these systems. The process of manufacture, test, launch and operation had to be developed while being executed making coordination of elite teams a standard for success. The best illustration of the work environment of SAFSP was articulated in a policy created by Colonel C. Lee Battle, Jr. CORONA program director in 1960. These embodied the essence of that work environment.

The 10 basic principles of "Battle's Laws":

1. Keep the program office small and quick reacting at all costs.
2. Exercise extreme care in selecting people, then rely heavily on their personal abilities.
3. Make the greatest possible use of SSD supporting organizations. You must make unreasonable demands to make sure of this support.
4. Cut out all unnecessary paperwork.
5. Control the Contractor by personal contact. Each man in the program office has a particular set of Contractor contacts.
6. Hit all flight checkout failures hard. A fault uncorrected now will come back to haunt you.

7. Rely strongly on contractor technical recommendations, once the program office has performed its function of making sure the contractor has given the problem sufficient effort.
8. Don't over communicate with higher headquarters.
9. Don't make a federal case out of it if your fiscal budget seems too low. These matters usually take care of themselves.
10. Don't look back. History never repeats itself.

Implementation is captured in these 17 guidelines:

1. Decision timing is critical, delays let people off the hook, foot dragging solves nothing, early testing shortens time to fix.
2. A good program office focuses on technical mission success.
3. The contractor is technically in the driver's seat and must be held fully responsible. The program office concentrates on evaluation, amount of effort, and quality of people on problems
4. Direct personal involvement of all program office members is vital. The Program Director is held personally responsible for everything and in turn he holds individuals under him in same status
5. The Program Office must remain small.
6. Use all other offices you can.
7. Never ask for help, you might get it.
8. Comply promptly with all report requirements,
9. Don't over-communicate with higher headquarters.
10. Financially you must live with the contractor. Never let him get behind in keeping a finger on his status to
11. Unfixed problems will bite you again. There is no such thing as a random failure. Personnel mistakes are far more likely than design defects.
12. System integration is important.
13. Insist these principles apply to all contractor activities.
14. Don't generate paperwork.
15. Committees are useless. Meetings don't accomplish anything that some individual was responsible to do in the first place.
16. Management surveys are punitive. Recognize it and employ them (if ever) accordingly.
17. Understand the relation between home office and field, there are many slips here.

Adhering to these ideals was only possible by selecting, screening and empowering the most competent people in government and industry. All members may not have seen a copy of "Battle's Laws" but they became our cultural standard. All supporting technical development were held to the same selection and screening criteria upheld the same focus of priority and mission success. Aerospace Corporation, launch and recovery operations and weather groups among others provided essential support for these missions and in that process emulated the principles of SAFSP. For those essential functions that could not be concealed such as launch, recovery, remote tracking/command control, and administrative budget & assignment, gate keepers were briefed at a level sufficient to coordinate and support these missions.

Headquarters SAFSP implemented National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) tasking and budget direction. The SAFSP director, an Air Force general, commanded both functional staff organizations for security, safety, personal/administration, research, contacts, tasking, budget, and launch common to all mission programs. He also commanded each satellite program office charged with the development, acquisition & operation of each separately compartmented satellite program.

Each system program director (SPO) managed his assigned mission using streamlined acquisition. Every member of his team was given exceptional authority, responsibility, and accountability to assure mission success. Military technical representatives worked, alongside contractors providing immediate input, feedback and resolutions. They wore civilian clothes, had company badges when in the contract facility having unique immediate technical oversight of development, fabrication & testing phases accelerated & optimized these advanced programs. This close relationship reduced administrative reporting and enabled decisions to be made rapidly resolving issues at the working level. The SPO technical team supported orbit operations applying their expertise and incorporating operational lessons to the design improvement of future vehicles. Responding to emerging intelligence requirements, programs increased operational capabilities and effectiveness with each successive vehicle incorporating subsystem improvements on a technically prudent risk-benefit basis. The accounts of CORONA, GAMBIT, HEXAGON and SIGINT programs documented in other sections of this website reflect those results.

Not all operational units were directly assigned to SAFSP or could be aware of the SAFSP mission objectives. In some units, few key individuals were briefed and then only to the extent necessary based on their "need to know" and function. The Satellite Control Facility tracking stations conduct command and control support at the secret level indistinguishable from other military satellites they supported. Analysis of the data collected was accomplished under systems in which the details of sources & method were not divulged. Air Force procurement offices like HQ/AFSC/SDSA "Special Activity Office" coordinated to assure these associated activities were developed and funded.

The SAFSP structure executed a rapid and effective response to our global strategic threat and operationally implement technology often a decade before it was thought to be possible under conventional acquisition rules. Collecting intelligence to a degree and accuracy our opponents couldn't predict by assuming conventional metrics was a significant advantage. SAFSP was military activity, but what made it fundamentally different was an almost complete reversal in the traditional rank-vs-responsibility relationship. Decisions were made at the lowest possible level, everyone knew it and felt responsible for it. The buck stopped at the bottom and never got to the top. Senior officers who spent years giving orders found this strange, but every SP member took ownership and pride making things happen earning their "special" designation.

This unique organizational environment can be represented by these example accounts of former members:

- A SPO program manager asked his contractor program manager how he felt about having his (military) team working within the contract facility. He responded, “It’s like having valuable consultants I don’t pay, I can’t BS, when they are irritating or fire them, but they are essential to success.”
- The SP director had a sign in his office that read, “Don't tell me what you know, tell me what I need to know.”
- When an issue was brought up to inform an SP superior he might ask, “Do you need my help?” the typically response was, “No-sir, I got it!”

The success of SAFSP was possible due to these individuals. Many SAFSP officers went on to become instrumental in critical development programs outside of the SAFSP organization later in their career.