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See also
Hanson Baldwin
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REACTION TO THE SOVIET SATELLITE

A Preliminary Evaluation



One week after the USSR announced that it had launched an earth satellite, a number of broad major effects on world public opinion appeared clear:

1. Soviet claims of scientific and technological superiority over the West and especially the U.S. have won greatly widened acceptance.
2. Public opinion in friendly countries shows decided concern over the possibility that the balance of military power has shifted or may soon shift in favor of the USSR.
3. The general credibility of Soviet propaganda has been greatly enhanced.
4. American prestige is viewed as having sustained a severe blow, and the American reaction, so sharply marked by concern, discomfiture and intense interest, has itself increased the disquiet of friendly countries and increased the impact of the satellite.

A few instances illustrate significantly the promptness, diversity and scope of the impact reported. Mexican editors expressed immediately diminished interest in USIS scientific feature articles, and frankly said that they were looking to Soviet sources for such material. In Tehran, officials of the Iranian Government considered the satellite such a blow to U.S. prestige that they displayed uneasy embarrassment in discussing it with Americans. Representatives of the Western European Union meeting in Strasbourg severely criticized the U.S. for falling behind in the arms race. In Japan, members of the Liberal Democratic Party agitated against further increases in conventional military forces. In Germany the SPD gave indications of reconsidering its policy of neutralism friendly to the U.S.

The satellite is, of course, most widely and readily accepted as proof of scientific and technical leadership by those with the least scientific and political sophistication. The degree to which informed scientific and political opinion believes that the USSR has surpassed the US in scientific

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capability cannot yet be assessed. Sophisticated opinion is, of course, far less likely to be impressed by the drama of the satellite or its being a "first". It will be much slower to form its opinion of the fundamental implications of the Soviet achievement as an index of the level of Soviet science, and of the relative capabilities of the U.S. and the USSR.

To this group, however, even temporary Soviet possession of a clear lead in missile research and technology underlines Soviet potential capacity to compete successfully in fields in which U.S. leadership has been generally taken for granted. The pattern may have changed, from one in which the USSR was seen as seeking to catch up, to one in which the USSR and the US are viewed as in more or less level competition. This is clearly one of the aims of Soviet propaganda treatment, which can be expected to make a very strong effort to create and deepen the impression that the satellite marks a new era, and to make its launching a sort of Great Divide.

Although the informed intelligentsia may give only limited assent to Soviet assertions, this will not immediately or very greatly limit Soviet psychological gains. The technologically less advanced -- the audience most impressed and dazzled by the Sputnik -- are the audience most vulnerable to the attractions of the Soviet system. The crux of the long-range Soviet propaganda effort may be its ability to win acceptance for the validity of the Soviet system, especially among the newly independent or dependent peoples, largely preoccupied with establishing quickly the technological level that will assure economic viability and national progress. The satellite, presented as the achievement and symbolic vindication of the Soviet system, helps to lend credence to Soviet claims -- particularly if it is followed by comparable achievements unmatched by the West.

This audience is not merely most eager to find ways for rapid technological advancement. It is also the audience -- especially in its broadest mass and most illiterate reaches -- most difficult to reach with cold fact and reasoned argument. It is in fact an audience difficult for the U.S. propagandist to reach at all with the resources at his disposal. The peculiar nature and dramatic appeal of the Sputnik, making its passes over every region of the earth, are likely to give it greatest impact among those least able to understand it. It will generate myth, legend and enduring superstition of a kind peculiarly difficult to eradicate or modify, which the USSR can exploit to its advantage, among backward, ignorant, and apolitical audiences particularly difficult to reach.

Assessment of the implications of the satellite -- following closely on the ICBM -- for the balance of military power probably follows the same general pattern. The distinction between military and scientific implications is often not being sharply drawn and appears hardly to be drawn at all among the least informed. The USSR is diligently seeking to create the impression that in this

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field too a watershed has been reached, and that a re-evaluation of relative military strength and positions must follow. Popular reaction will affect willingness to support conventional armaments, and may give support to Soviet claims that current Western positions on disarmament are outdated.

The Soviet Union may well believe that it has succeeded in creating sufficient doubts about US military superiority to give it decided advantages if it should choose to launch psychological warfare campaigns in either the classic "War of Nerves" or "Peace Campaign" pattern. It appears to be readying the psychological ground for such operations. If there should be any substantial public conclusion that the USSR is leading in military power, the USSR would appear to speak from strength not weakness. This psychological advantage could be exploited whether in seeking a detente or attempting an expansionist venture.

Soviet efforts to exploit the military significance of the scientific and technological victory it has registered are currently still largely indirect: they could, particularly if conducted with brusqueness, braggadocio, and bellicosity, become psychologically counterproductive, by underscoring the aggressive motives and methods of the Soviet system. They would, thus, raise in the very audiences they seek to impress doubts about the reality of Soviet desires for "peaceful coexistence" and about the likelihood that Soviet world dominance would further their national aspirations. It is too soon to judge whether Soviet awareness of this danger will impose effective restraints on their exploitation of recent and potential future propaganda successes.

To the extent that the Soviets are aware of the fact that maximum effective exploitation of their gains depends upon keeping a balance between "peacefulness" and "strength" in claiming achievements for the Soviet system, we may see strengthened propaganda efforts designed to dramatize the willingness of the USSR to offer the peaceful fruits of these achievements to others, to extend "scientific and technical cooperation and assistance." They are, in fact, well launched on this competition in many areas.

To some extent, at this early stage, judgments are in suspension, particularly among the informed, and among those leaders whose attitudes are especially important to the U.S. interest. Much of this suspension of judgment stems, however, from confidence in the ability of the U.S. speedily to recapture lost ground and to surpass the USSR. Even if this expectation were considerably delayed in fulfillment, many of these persons would not modify their assessments of the relative desirability of the two systems. But this audience is not presumably a primary target of either U.S. or Soviet propaganda.

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In judging the long-range significance of reaction, one finding of 1956 public opinion surveys in Western Europe and Japan is of particular interest. Asked whether they expected the U.S. or the USSR to emerge the stronger in peaceful "competitive coexistence" over the next twenty-five years, a substantial body of opinion answered "the USSR"; the average U.S. lead in the five chief West European countries was only eleven per cent.

A final point that deserves noting is the fact that the U.S. itself set the stage for assuring the impact of the Sputnik -- first by the fanfare of its own announcement of its satellite plans, second by creating the impression that we considered ourselves to have an invulnerable lead in this scientific and technological area, and third by the nature of the reaction within the U.S. All this has served to underscore the importance, implications, and presumed validity of Soviet performance and Soviet claims. American anxiety, recrimination, and intense emotional interest have been widely noted abroad, and assiduously reported by Soviet media. The nature of U.S. public reaction in the immediate future will continue to be an important factor in coloring the responses of other people. One moral that might be drawn is that a propagandist cannot have his crow and eat it too.

This has all helped to increase the credibility of Soviet propaganda, although presumably no U.S. reaction, however serene and poised, could have markedly diminished the basic gain in credibility derived from the incontestable fact that the Soviet system had achieved difficult and impressive scientific "first." This gain in credibility, which can be exploited by every aspect of Soviet propaganda, may in the long run be the most durable and useful gain accruing to the USSR from the satellite.

In sum:

1. The Soviet satellite supplies an opportunity for the USSR to claim that it has opened a new era, marked by a spectacular overtaking of the U.S. in a vital field where we have been accustomed to count on superiority, and now competes with the U.S. as an equal;
2. Public opinion will, for a period that cannot now be forecast, be narrowly assessing the relative military positions of the U.S. and the USSR;
3. The USSR, in this same period, will have a clear advantage in the cold war, which it can exploit for either "peaceful" gestures or ventures in increased pressures -- or both simultaneously.
4. The satellite, presented as a demonstration that the Soviet system has gained scientific and technical superiority, lends increased appeal to that system particularly in areas that view their problems as requiring the rapid achievement of a higher technological level;
5. General Soviet credibility has been sharply enhanced.

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