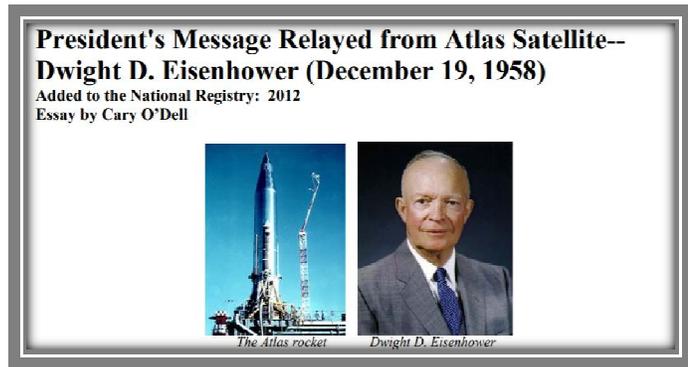


It Came from Outer Space

There have been many presidential Christmas messages delivered by various means of communication during America's past hundred years, but one of the most remarkable must certainly be the one from President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in December, 1958. His pre-recorded message was transmitted to Earth from outer space. It was done as part of what had been a U.S. top-secret mission, Project SCORE (Signal Communications by Orbiting Relay Equipment).



Although in the 21st century we tend to take communications satellites for granted, the technology was still in the experimental stages 60 years ago. The United States, by 1958, was lagging behind the Soviet Union's achievements in the "space race" and it was hoped that Project SCORE would score an important victory for the U.S. space program.

There were about 88 people originally involved in the secret project, but only 35 of them knew the real purpose behind Project SCORE's December, 1958 test. It had two critical objectives: first, to send an Atlas ICBM rocket into low Earth orbit, which was important for our national defense, and, at that point in time, had never been done; and second, to successfully launch the world's 1st communications satellite. For this second purpose, a battery-operated UHF communication system, consisting of a receiver, a transmitter, and a continuous-loop tape recorder able to record a message or play one back for up to four minutes, was developed. The system could last about three weeks in orbit. Four ground stations, located in Arizona, Texas, California, and Georgia, were set up and connected to a control center at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Each of these could issue commands to the satellite to play a pre-recorded stored message, record a new message, or relay a live message from one ground station to another. A recorded message could be transmitted from the satellite and received by anyone on Earth who had a shortwave radio.

Plans called for a member of the project team to pre-record an historical text into the primary recorder and also into a back-up system. However, a few days before the scheduled launch, the Director of the U.S. Advanced Research Project Agency convinced President Eisenhower, who was strongly in favor of America's space program, to record the test message. The President's message was delivered to Cape Canaveral on December 17, but, because the originally-planned message was already sealed in the relay equipment on the Atlas, which, by that time, was fueled and ready on the launch pad, Eisenhower's recording had to be transmitted to the communication system in the rocket by radio signal. This process was successful, and on December 18, 1958, at 11:02 p.m. EST, the Atlas B ICBM rocket lifted off, roared into the sky, and reached orbit, thus accomplishing Project SCORE's first objective. As to the second objective and the President's message, the primary system's tape recorder jammed, so it wasn't until the satellite's 13th orbit, on December 19, that a command from a ground station finally activated the back-up system. Then the following message for the season from President Eisenhower was heard on shortwave radios around the world: ***"This is the President of the United States speaking. Through the marvels of scientific advance, my voice is coming to you from a satellite circling in outer space. My message is a simple one. Through this unique means, I convey to you and all mankind America's wish for peace on Earth and goodwill toward men everywhere."***

American ingenuity, know-how, and determination had triumphed in the "space race" – and had delivered a technological breakthrough, a Christmas present to the future.

Priscilla Poese, Americanism Chair

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