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27 February 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR: Board of Inquiry in the Case of Francis Gary Powers

SUBJECT: Phenomenon Relating to Destruction of the U-2

1. Mr. Francis Gary Powers testified that while flying towards Sverdlovsk at 70,000 feet he felt something that appeared to be an acceleration of the plane or a push from behind it accompanied by a dull noise which did not have the characteristic sharpness of a normal explosion. This caused him to look up and he saw surrounding him, or possibly as a reflection on the canopy, an orange or reddish glare which appeared to persist and not merely flash and disappear.

2. While the Board was not charged with attempting to develop what the technical causes of the U-2 destruction were, the Board expressed concern as to whether Mr. Powers had described a phenomenon which was completely unacceptable to current scientific knowledge and, therefore, his truthfulness might be in question.

3. I, therefore, discussed this point with Dr. Herbert Scoville, Jr., Assistant Director for Scientific Intelligence. I specifically asked if a small nuclear warhead on a rocket could have caused the effect described by Powers. Dr. Scoville said that this possibility had been explored during the period after the event occurred on 1 May 1960 with negative results as to any information on such a nuclear explosion. He further pointed out that if an explosion sufficient to send out a shock wave that would have injured the plane had taken place at that altitude the radioactivity

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would have extended out in fatal form beyond such an effective shock wave so it would seem certain that had such a nuclear explosion taken place Powers would have been killed by the radioactivity. However, Dr. Scoville further commented that if a missile with a conventional warhead had reached that altitude with a portion of its fuel unexpended and then exploded or disintegrated, fuel containing nitric acid could, under these circumstances, create a luminous cloud effect which might be consistent with Powers' description. However, as to what actually happened to Powers' plane on 1 May 1960, this, from a scientific point of view, is still considered an unsolved matter.

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LAWRENCE R. HOUSTON
Counsel to the Board

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