The X-2: Public Relations Fiasco

THE SINS of omission and commission created in the name of national security continue at a fast clip.

Take the Bell X-2, probably the major public relations fiasco of 1956. It has been a continuous story of mishandling since July.

First came the X-2 speed record established in July. As is well known, the Pentagon decided to withhold the news. Naturally and inevitably, the story leaked out. Even General Nathan Twining was placed in the embarrassing spot of having to hedge in his speech to the Air Force Association in August at a time when the press was heralding the actual speed record.

But then came the X-2 altitude record in September. The story was obtained simultaneously by AMERICAN AVIATION and another aviation magazine. The Pentagon requested that both publications sit on the story, which was done with reluctance and an almost certain knowledge that the story would leak elsewhere. And leak it did, naturally. The two aviation magazines lost their beat.

Subsequently, the X-2 crashed and the pilot was killed. The USAF said first that the pilot was not trying for a record, then later announced that he had set a new speed record. Questions inevitably arose about the final flight, particularly about the use of a relatively inexperienced pilot for a record attempt. The USAF has issued two clarifications to date and there is no guarantee that the matter is yet finished.

The dubious honors for the X-2 fiasco can be divided between the Defense Department and the USAF, since the former attempted to hold up the speed record and the latter the altitude record. (The worst offender in the overall security system is, of course, the top-heavy Defense Department.) The X-2 was a story of great national interest and of industry achievement. The USAF missed out for various reasons on newsworthy events of importance to itself and the nation.

Another interesting aspect of how the national security system is working is the recently released sketch of the Convair B-58. Issuance followed by almost two months an openly bootlegged photograph of the aircraft which was widely published in September.

The national security system is the most vexing problem in the relationship of the Air Force and or Department of Defense with industry publications. So severe are the restrictions that in many cases they simply appear ridiculous. Publications must impose a kind of self-censorship on themselves to avoid what might be, by certain interpretations, breaches of security.

A committee headed by Charles Coolidge, a special assistant to Defense Secretary Wilson, is looking into the whole security problem. It is to be hoped that this group can recommend some realistic, workable rules and procedures which take into account both the requirements of industrial publications and the genuine rather than the fancied considerations of national security.

It is doubtful if there can ever be a perfect solution to the security problem, but Henry T. Simmons of the staff of AMERICAN AVIATION has suggested several proposals for improvement based on the thinking of himself and some of the enlightened personnel at the Pentagon:

1. Greater authority over security decisions by the Office of Security Review in the Pentagon. Such decisions should be made by professionals in the security business. A more imaginative approach and a better organization are badly needed.

2. All directives on security should be in writing including even "informal guidance." Some practical examples should be given so that security officers could understand in specific terms the information they are trying to protect in the light of its "protectability."

3. Security officers should have a greater understanding of the needs of news media and should avoid negative responses on footling and trivial matters where U.S. security, if any, is so tenuous as to be scarcely visible.

We think Mr. Simmons (and the Pentagon views he reflects) is on the right track. The regulations now in effect are numerous, confused and contradictory. Some are written but the bulk are verbal. There is little understanding of the rules, such as they are, on the part of a vast number of USAF officers and top civilians who actually possess blue-pencil authority under the present set-up. The Security Review Office of the Defense Department is a mere figurehead in security matters.

The cynical maxim—"When in doubt, cut it out!"—seems to rule the majority of official decisions on security questions. The present hit-or-miss, catch-as-catch-can, no-rhyme-or-reason security policy is the despair both of the men who must run it and the editors and reporters who are virtually forced to submit to it.