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An Unintended Consequence of the IGY: Eisenhower, Sputnik, and the Founding of NASA

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In October 1957 the Soviet Union launched the first Earth-circling artificial satellite and the crisis that resulted led to numerous actions in the United States aimed at “remediating” a Cold War crisis. This included the establishment of a separate civilian space agency charged with the conduct of an official program of scientific and technological space exploration, consolidation of Department of Defense space activities, the passage of the National Defense Education Act, the creation of a Presidential Science Advisor, and a host of lesser actions. The politics of these changes is fascinating, and has been interpreted as an appropriate political response to a unique crisis situation. Interest groups, all for differing reasons, prodded national leaders to undertake large-scale efforts, something the president thought unnecessarily expensive and once set in place impossible to dismantle. But was the Sputnik crisis truly a crisis in any real sense? Was it made into one by interest groups who used it for their own ends? This paper will trace briefly some of the major themes associated with the IGY and Sputnik and describe the political construction of the crisis as it emerged in 1957-1958. It will also discuss something about the transformation of federal science and technology that took place in the aftermath of the “crisis” and how it set in train a series of processes and policies that did not unravel until the end of the Cold War.