

Chapter III

Recognition of Potential

A Time of Transition: 1960-1961

Throughout his eight years in office, President Eisenhower strove to project attitudes of calm and of confidence in the future, but events worked against him. Early in his first term, the nation's sense of innate superiority was weakened by the realization that the Korean conflict was ended by a negotiated settlement rather than a clear cut military victory. Nine months into his second term, that sense was severely shaken by Russia's orbiting of Sputnik I. At that point, Eisenhower had already initiated programs to revive scientific, technological and organizational energies. In 1955, for example, he had approved plans for launching an American satellite as part of U.S. participation in the International Geophysical Year. After Sputnik's launch there was a greater appreciation of the political significance of such accomplishments.¹ Existing programs were accelerated and new ones undertaken. Eisenhower saw the need to match and surpass these achievements. He saw also a need to prevent the U.S. response to this challenge in space from being equated by other nations as being limited solely to military needs and objectives.² It was to avoid this interpretation that from the outset, in planning for NASA, the emphasis was on scientific objectives, and on the peaceful, civilian pursuit of scientific goals.

Homer Newell, a NASA administrator, and later an historian of the agency, wrote of the circumstances that helped shape its mission:

A majority of those who would finally make the decision soon became convinced that the most effective way of proving U.S. leadership in space would be to demonstrate it openly. Moreover, a space program conducted under wraps of military secrecy would very likely be viewed by other nations as a sinister thing, a potential threat to the peace of the world. . . . It seemed important, therefore, that the U.S. space program be open, unclassified, visibly peaceful, and conducted so as to benefit, not harm, the peoples of the world.³