
THE ZIRCON CHALLENGE

1. It has been alleged that press disclosure of the Zircon satellite plan will damage Britain's national security by giving the Soviet Union a number of years in which to plan countermeasures to protect their communications from being intercepted by the new satellite.

Entrants are required to explain if this could actually happen - and if so how. So imagine that you are the Soviet KGB General in charge of communications security. You have just read the New Statesman article about Project Zircon. Then Mr Gorbachev's office telephones to say that the First Secretary wants a plan to protect the national security of the Soviet Union against eavesdropping by Zircon, on his desk by the end of the week. What will you say in your plan ? Can you escape a ten-year posting to Siberia, this time ?

Entrants must satisfy the Judges that they have successfully devised and clearly described at least one effective technical countermeasure (derived from the New Statesman disclosures) that the Soviet Union could now take to prevent the planned new British Zircon satellite intercepting Soviet communications as it may be required to do.

2. The Zircon Challenge prize is #1000, and the Judges will award the full amount to the first successful entry received. In the event of any tie or argument, their decision will be final.

3. All entrants must :

(1) Read the New Statesman article of 23 January 1987, entitled 'The Parliamentary Bypass Operation', which describes how the government has secretly committed #500 million to this project, and failed to notify Parliament in the manner required.

(2) Acquaint themselves with publicly available information (which is consequently available to the Soviet intelligence service) about United States intelligence satellites of the same type as the Zircon project. All entries must take fully into consideration the extent to which the Soviet Union is likely already to have taken suitable countermeasures to protect their communications from being intercepted by existing satellites of which they are aware. (*)

(3) Acquaint themselves with publicly available information about known Soviet espionage successes against Britain's GCHQ and the US National Security Agency. All entries must take fully into consideration the entrant's assessment of the extent to which, as a result of information from such spies, the Soviet Union is likely to have taken specialised countermeasures to protect their communications from being intercepted by western sigint satellites. (**)

Zircon Challenge (2)

4. Entries from employees of the Ministry of Defence, Government Communications Headquarters, Zircon contractors, and Ministers or other members of Her Majesty's Government are eligible for the Zircon Challenge. Such entrants are warned that any information provided must be strictly in accordance with the provisions of the Official Secrets Acts, 1911-1939. Entries are particularly welcome from political journalists and commentators, and from Conservative Party Members of Parliament.

5. The three Judges are all distinguished international experts, authors and consultants in electronic intelligence and space systems. They are :

Professor Jeffrey Richelson, Centre for Government Studies, The American University, Washington DC (USA)

Dr John Pike, Director of Space Policy, Federation of American Scientists, Washington DC (USA)

Dr Desmond Ball, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, Canberra (Australia)

6. Entries should be sent to ZIRCON CHALLENGE, c/o Diary, The Independent, 40, City Road, London EC1, or to ZIRCON CHALLENGE, c/o Jane Thomas, New Statesman, 14-16 Farringdon Lane, London EC1.

7. The closing date for receipt of entries is Friday 27 March 1987.

* Information on US listening satellites is available in many books in public libraries - for example, the 'Puzzle Palace', by James Bamford. These describe how the first American RHYOLITE listening satellite was launched seventeen years ago, in 1970. Since then, at least twelve more major satellites in the RHYOLITE, ARGUS, CHALET, VORTEX, JUMPSEAT and MAGNUM series have been orbited, together with many smaller listening satellites.

** Two major cases which must be considered, as a minimum, are the 1982 Geoffrey Prime spy case at GCHQ Cheltenham, and the Christopher Boyce and Andrew Daulton case in California in 1977. Boyce is known to have betrayed the capabilities of the RHYOLITE satellite (while working at RHYOLITE AND ZIRCON contractors, TRW), while Prime worked on and betrayed US satellite sigint data, probably from the CHALET satellite.
