OPEN SKIES FOR PEACE

London, January 21

by Alex Fry

A FUSTY place, the central hall of the Royal Exchange, a claustrophobic vault better suited to its usual purpose of depicting the varied scene of London's past. Yet there amid the painted panels is the squat, shiny exhibition of an idea that may determine the world's immediate future. The Eisenhower Open Skies Exhibition—there is a fresh ring about it. The eighteen months since Geneva have still not accustomed us to the sentiment with which the U.S. Information Service introduces Open Skies For Peace: "No nation could win an atomic war today—all would be destroyed."

But if the conception is bold, the pace is more like that of a disarmament conference proper. Shuffling along with the City crowd beneath massive portraits of the likable Ike, of the rather less relaxed figures at the summit talks, we learn, word by word, that "an effective disarmament system can be reached only if at its base there is effective reciprocal inspection and overall supervision." The exhibition makes its first point the blueprinting of all military establishments. This is no figurative blueprint. There on the wall is a draughtsman's blue and white map of the United States, twelve feet by eight, carefully marked and giving in its legend the name and position of every military establishment the U.S. admits to. There are several hundreds. The legend begins with Aberdeen Proving Ground and ends with York N.O.P.—still something of a mystery except to the initiate. In between there are some familiar names, not least of them Los Alamos. There is also a plan, specific as an architect's drawing, of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base with the disposition of units marked thereon, and the additional information that 3288 officers, 3804 airmen and 20,547 civilians find employment there. No half measures. The exchange of such plans, the conjoined text suggests, is the prerequisite for preventing surprise attack and achieving the ease of tension that will permit disarmament.

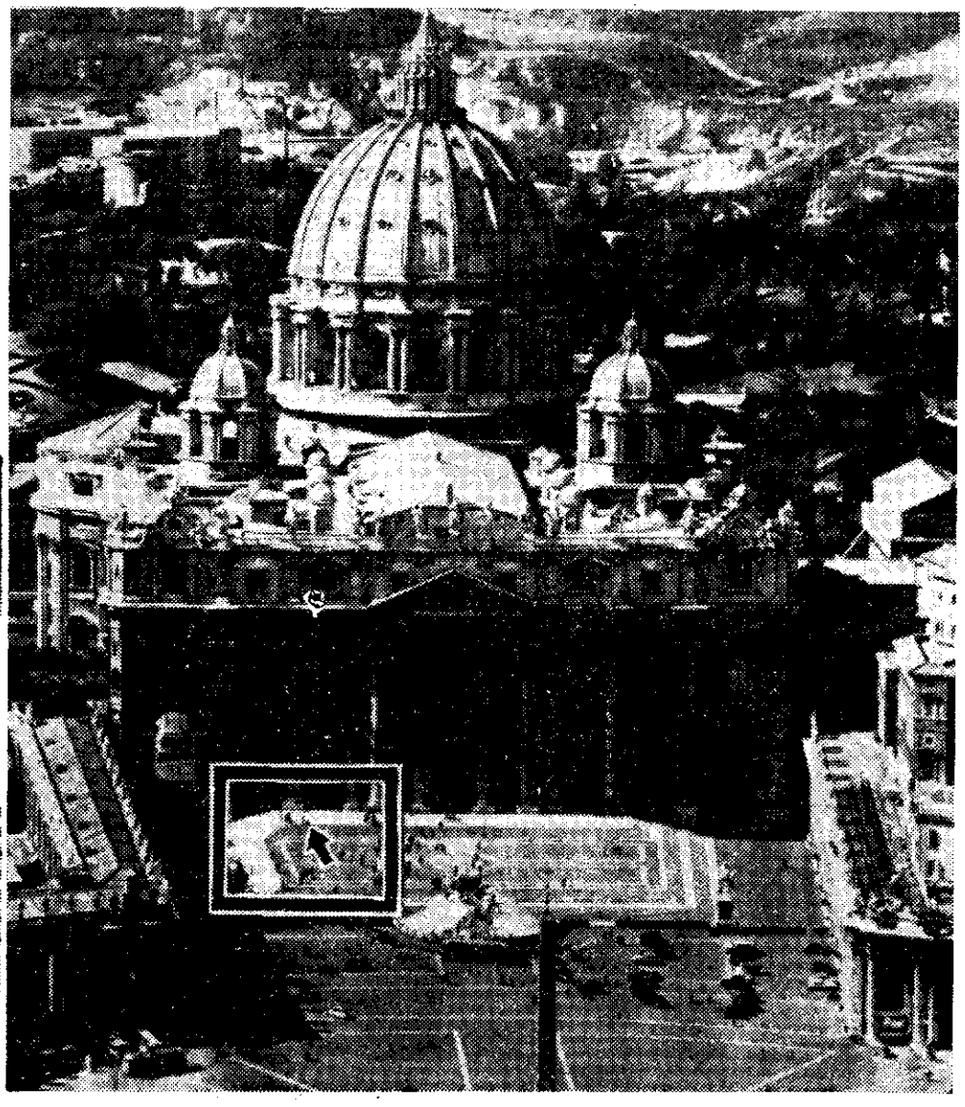
The central theme, of course, is aerial photography itself. Here, like others interested in the film industry, the USIS goes Italian. St. Peter's, a difficult shot for the amateur, snaps magnificently from an Italian Air Force jet travelling at 500 miles an hour. With a little selective enlargement the blob on the steps becomes unmistakably a poodle, unmistakably French. The whole of Italy, it appears, could be photographed as distinctly by four aircraft in one hour. If statistics be preferred, three men in one medium survey plane can snap one million square miles in three hours.

Still in Italy, the survey treats its visitors to aerial views of a horse (rearing at the sound of the aircraft) and a pair of lovers (oblivious) in the gardens of the Villa Borghese. A U.S. print invites a count of the rivets in the wing of a parked plane 60 feet beneath the soaring cameras. As yet no sign of anything as martial as a cleverly camouflaged footslogger. Pointing to an infinitesimal spot on a picture of New York City a disrespectful Londoner observes, "I'm sure I've seen that bloke somewhere before."

To save the situation, there are pictures of a copper mine, a marshalling yard and an oil refinery, clear, revealing prints which can tell an expert interpreter of significant changes in production or movement. War preparation this century involves more than the movement of armies. A disappointment in this section of the exhibition is the absence of pictorial evidence to support the surveyor's contention that camouflage does not defeat the camera. In recent years, it appears, a new type of film makes possible the location of disguised areas. All living vegetation containing natural chlorophyll shows up in red while everything else appears a dull grey-green. (The reverse, in fact, of some recent colour trends in toothpaste.) Taken all together the photographic display convinces of its practicability as well as its supervisory value. One hopes only that it is not open to simple, unforeseen accidents like that which foiled the crowd-counting device at the exhibition's exit. This photo-electric marvel failed to record several dozen visitors at least who filed past while one careful citizen cloaked himself against the winter, immediately in front of its lens.

That there is still a place for the human observer, however, is clear from the exhibition's final section. This opens briskly with a portrait of Marshal Bulganin and a quotation from one of his letters to the American president: "The system of control proposed by us—namely the creation of control posts in large ports, at railroad junctions, on automobile highways and at airfields—is designed to prevent dangerous concentrations of troops and combat equipment . . ." But the section closes the argument equally briskly. There is a picture of the President, and a sentence from his letter in reply, "I have not forgotten your proposal having to do with stationing inspection teams in our countries—we could accept that, too."

When it closes in London (January 26) the exhibition is to be shown in Manchester, Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, Bristol, Belfast, Cardiff and probably Edinburgh. And there are tentative plans for a tour of West Europe. What London thought of it is hard to assess. There has been little editorial comment. But the exhibition is attracting larger numbers than one would expect. This city has not yet had time to forget that it is a likely first target for a rocket attack such as that threatened by the Soviet leader during the Suez crisis. On the other hand the U.S. exhibitors may well have been disappointed by the numbers who glanced briefly at Open Skies For Peace, yet lingered in the Exchange hall to view the lovely statues of pagan gods and goddesses unearthed from the Temple of Mithras in the City of London. It is thought that they were buried beneath the temple floor in the year 313 to conceal them from profane eyes at a time when Christianity had become the official religion of Rome.



"ST. PETER'S snaps magnificently from a jet travelling at 500 miles an hour." The smaller photograph below—showing the poodle on the steps—is an enlargement of the area at the point of the arrow in the righthand picture