



Written by [Mary McHugh](#) on November 23, 2010

NROL-32 Spy Satellite Launched by the United States

From Cape Canaveral last Sunday evening, the Air Force, in conjunction with United Launch Alliance (ULA), launched a “massive, secret spy satellite” according to a CBS report, the 351st Delta launch since the program’s maiden flight in 1960.

The liftoff was delayed from its original launch date last Thursday due to questionable wiring in the system that allows the rocket to release from the launch pad. It was further postponed on Friday when, due to faulty sensors, unexpected temperature readings were revealed in the common core boosters while fueling was underway.



ULA’s website stated that the Delta IV Heavy rocket was “carrying a payload for the National Reconnaissance Office” and designated the mission as “NROL-32.” It added that “the mission is in support of national defense.” Because of the classified nature of the payload, ULA halted its launch commentary about seven minutes into the successful liftoff, when all systems appeared normal.

The launch, seen here, was described by CBS as follows:

Under a cloudy sky, the hydrogen-fueled engines in the three common core boosters of the United Launch Alliance Delta 4 ignited with a rush of orange fire at 5:58 p.m. EST and quickly throttled up to nearly 2 million pounds of thrust.

Hold-down clamps then released and the huge rocket majestically climbed away from launch complex 37 atop a torrent of fiery exhaust. About 30 seconds later, it knifed into a deck of low clouds and disappeared from view.

The Delta IV Heavy launch booster was constructed in Decatur, Alabama. ULA vice president of mission operations, Jim Spohnick, noted that this launch for the NRO is “the culmination of years of hard work and dedication by the combined NRO, Air Force, supplier, and ULA team.... ULA is pleased to support the NRO as it protects our nation’s security and supports our warriors defending our nation around the world.”

Of more interest to all was the payload. The [Spaceflight Now](#) website quoted the National Reconnaissance Office: “Always vigilant, the NRO’s eyes and ears give America’s policy makers, intelligence analysts, war fighters and homeland security specialists the critical information they need to keep America safe, secure and free.”

The NRO’s director, Bruce Carlson, pointed out last September that the Delta IV was carrying “the largest satellite in the world.” This satellite is believed by experts to be an electronic eavesdropping device with “a huge collecting antenna” according to the CBS report, and once on station is expected to “unfold a huge, lightweight antenna to tap into targeted military or civilian communications networks.”

One commentator told Spaceflight Now:



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"I believe the payload is the fifth in the series of what we call Mentor spacecraft, a.k.a. Advanced Orion, which gather signals intelligence from inclined geosynchronous orbits. They are among the largest satellites ever deployed," said Ted Molczan, a respected sky-watcher who keeps tabs on orbiting spacecraft.

... "The satellite likely consists of sensitive radio receivers and an antenna generally believed to span up to 100 meters (328 feet) to gather electronic intelligence for the National Security Agency," Molczan said.

... Although NRO satellites are secretive by nature, the spacecraft are visible by just looking up. Molczan is member of a hobbyist group that routinely finds and watches the craft while monitoring the skies with precision.

But despite the identity of this particular satellite being obvious, exactly where in the geosynchronous belt it will be positioned and what part of the globe it will cover are details that remain hush-hush.

Molczan feels last Sunday's launch may have been to "replace one of the older spacecrafts in the series, or augment the fleet by occupying a new location in geosynchronous orbit."

During this time of continued and increased government intrusion and surveillance on U.S. civilian life, liberty, and property, there naturally are questions about not only the NROL-32's capabilities, but all the purposes to which they may be put to use.

The Air Force has ordered the next Delta IV Heavy launch, called NROL-49, for January 11, 2011. This mission is NRO as well and its details are classified. According to the United Launch Alliance website, it will be the first such launch from Vandenberg AFB in California.

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