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### **National Security Implications of the Asteroid Threat**

Speaking at the George Marshall Institute's Washington Roundtable on Science and Public Policy on February 4, 2003, Dr. Randall Correll called for greater awareness of the risks associated with small asteroid detonation in Earth's atmosphere and urged a high-level dialogue to discuss the potential to relax limits presently placed on the release of data from classified defense satellites.

Every year about 30 asteroids enter Earth's atmosphere and explode, releasing as much energy as the Hiroshima A-bomb. Such an event occurred in June 2002 when an asteroid entered the atmosphere and detonated over the Mediterranean.

"While it is important not to overly sensationalize the issue, an asteroid impact, when combined with the potential for miscalculation and misperception by nations lacking sophisticated observation systems, could be mistaken for a missile strike and precipitate a nuclear conflict," said Jeff Kueter, the Marshall Institute's Executive Director.

The United States has technology to differentiate between missile attacks, nuclear detonations and asteroid explosions, but many less advanced nations do not. While the U.S. has the capacity to distinguish between nuclear explosions and asteroid impacts, it lacks the systems, procedures, and resources to disseminate this information in a timely manner.

"The United States has operational systems capable of distinguishing between nuclear detonations and asteroid impacts, but at the present time, there is no procedure for processing the data from these systems in a routine manner," Dr. Correll said.

“Despite the significant technical capability of national security systems to observe asteroids, they are currently hamstrung in their ability to be marshaled in support of an emergency warning or crisis reaction response,” Correll continued.

Correll argued that it is “technically feasible to extract data on natural phenomena from the classified mission data, essentially processing both streams in parallel,” at reasonable cost and preserving national security interests. Civilian leaders at the Defense Department, the Administration, and the Congress need only to make the policy decision to allow it to happen and commit the resources necessary to accomplish the task.

Dr. Randall R. Correll is a currently a national security consultant with Science Applications International Company in Mclean, Virginia. He served in the United States Air Force in a wide variety of research, development and space assignments. This included a tour of duty engaged in nuclear treaty monitoring operations. He earned his PhD in physics from the University of Texas and has published scientific and technical papers in gravitational physics, meteor sciences and remote sensing technology.

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