

NGA's Historian Reflects on First 10 Years

By Dr. Martin K. Gordon

On Nov. 24, 2003, President George W. Bush signed the 2004 Defense Authorization Bill, a provision of which authorized use of the name National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, replacing the name National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA). This change marked the latest step in the evolution of this intelligence and defense support agency that formally began Oct. 1, 1996.

Converging Trends and Lessons Learned

Converging trends in technology, Congressional interest in economy, and the agreement of the Central Intelligence Agency and Department of Defense, influenced by lessons from Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm, all came together in 1996 to establish NIMA. The Defense Mapping Agency (DMA), Central Imagery Office, Defense Dissemination Program Office and National Photographic Interpretation Center all were merged into NIMA. Congress also brought selected imagery-related parts of the CIA, Defense Airborne Reconnaissance Office, Defense Intelligence Agency and National Reconnaissance Office into NIMA. The National Photographic Interpretation Center in the early 1960s had absorbed staff from the Defense Intelligence Agency and from the Army, Navy, and Air Force. DMA itself was formed after the Vietnam War from the mapping, charting and geodesy functions of the Army, Navy and Air Force. Thus, the establishment of NIMA reflected government-wide trends to consolidate functions for the purpose of more efficient use of technology and the resulting dollar savings.

NIMA's Accomplishments

The years 1996-2003 saw these organizations learning to work together. This was especially hard, as many of the workforce including supervisors had believed right up to NIMA's standup that this event would never happen.

During those years, NIMA continued the work of its predecessors, influencing world events, for example, by creating animated renditions of imagery and geospatial data that allowed users to visualize inaccessible terrain. This enabled NIMA to assist in resolving international boundary disputes, for example, the disputed boundaries between Peru and Ecuador and Israel and Lebanon. NIMA also provided maps and visualizations that gave the Dayton Peace accord diplomats from the Balkans graphic views of the boundary locations they were debating. In February 2000, the Space Shuttle Endeavour's Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (SRTM) provided the most detailed measurements of our planet's elevations ever gathered. In addition, NIMA contributed to homeland-defense and disaster-relief efforts, helped the armed forces overseas and developed newer aeronautical charts.

After the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 NIMA took on additional responsibilities. It contributed to homeland security, helped even more in safeguarding events in this country and overseas, assisted the armed force's work in Iraq and Afghanistan, and worked with domestic relief agencies after major disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

