

# The US Space Force & the Issue of Dominance

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At this moment, given the nationwide peaceful uprisings, the seeming meltdown of democracy in certain locales, and the newest moves toward fundamental police reform, the recent creation of a sixth, space-focused branch of the US armed forces may strike you as thoroughly irrelevant. It is not.

## **First: some facts:**

In the spring of 2017, the day after being sworn in as Secretary of the Air Force, which encompasses both air and the airlessness of space, Heather Wilson declared that space “is a warfighting domain just like land, air, and sea.” Not quite. Yes, space could be turned into a warfighting domain, but it isn’t one yet. Space war is not foreordained.

In mid-June 2018, during a speech to the National Space Council, the 45th president of our country issued a sudden demand that the United States establish a separate new branch of the Defense Department, devoted wholly to space: “When it comes to defending America, it is not enough to have an American presence in space; we must have American dominance in space. So important.”

Two months later the US vice president announced that planning had begun and that the first task was to “develop a space warfighting doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures.” He went on to say, “America will always seek peace, in space as on the earth, but history proves that peace only comes through strength.”

In early 2019, Trump signed a presidential directive urging the creation of the Space Force. As elsewhere, the advancing space capabilities of adversaries are decried, deterrence is foregrounded, and the need to ensure unfettered access to space is paramount. “Responsible actors” are the only

ones whose “peaceful use of space” is permitted. The agenda is “projecting military power in, from, and to space in support of our Nation’s interests.”

After reading a few prepared lines about exploration at the ceremonial signing of that directive, Trump spoke in his usual style: “Adversaries, whether we get along with them or not, they’re up in space, and they’re doing it and we’re doing it. And that’s going to be a very big part of ~~where~~ the defense of our nation -- and you could say ‘offense,’ but let’s just be nice about it and let’s say the defense of our nation.”

In late December 2019, the US Space Force officially came into being. Its 2020 budget is \$40 million; its proposed 2021 budget is almost 400 times larger: \$15.4 billion. Within the context of the entire Department of Defense -- with its six branches of the armed forces, its \$738 billion budget for 2020, its almost 3 million employees, and its real-estate assets on more than 4500 sites worldwide -- the Space Force is a tiny thing.

By the way, just a little background to this background: For almost two centuries the Department of Defense was called the War Department. In 1949 it acquired its current name. War was recast as defense -- a convenient euphemism, as Trump himself recognized. As far as the position of the Space Force within the structure of the armed forces: In 1982 a new Combatant Command was created under the wing of the Air Force: the Space Command, soon to be renamed the Air Force Space Command and then, as of last December, the US Space Force. (The US military does a lot of renaming and very little streamlining or cost-cutting.) This new, sixth branch is distinct but not autonomous. As with the Marine Corps, which is a component within the Navy, the Space Force remains a component of the Air Force.

OK, so. Finally, and most recently, on the last day of last month, SpaceX, a private corporation, succeeded in transporting astronauts to the International Space Station, fulfilling a longstanding US agenda following the demise of the space shuttle program in 2011: to have the commercial space sector -- the space industry -- dominate ventures in low Earth orbit (including the International Space Station), while NASA serves (in part) as a business partner, raking in some funds to help support deep-

space exploration (though that, too, would often if not always involve collaboration with the space-industrial sector). Meanwhile, the US Space Force is meant to focus on militarization.

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**OK. Those are the facts. Now: some commentary:**

What is happening in our country captures something of the same conceptual tension inherent in the mandate of the armed forces -- the obligation to safeguard/protect human life and property coupled with the readiness to use extreme force and deadly weaponry. The stated mission of the Defense Dept is to “provide the military forces needed to deter war and ensure our nation’s security.” This involves an uneasy marriage of two goals, in the name of peace. On the one hand the well-being of the nation and the nation’s people; on the other hand, the might of the military, deployed to vanquish enemies. The rationale for their union is deterrence, supposedly the inevitable outcome of possessing maximal force capabilities. Indeed, on the “About” page of the US Department of Defense website, under the heading “Priorities,” first on the list is “Lethality.”

In the standard view, as captured by Pence, security is grounded in military strength, not social or economic or racial justice, not on equality before the law, not on an environment in which all species can thrive for generations to come, not from fair wages and safe housing and clean water and rational decision-making and protection of the constitutional right to voice dissent. In this standard view, security arises from the suppression of opposition through fear, through the possibility of destruction and even death. It is taken as axiomatic that the more formidable and weaponized the forces, the more successful the suppression and thus the greater the security.

But it’s worth asking, “the security of WHAT exactly?” That’s what so many public figures and private citizens are asking right now, with regard to the very nature of our country. Well, let me raise that same question with regard to space.

Take the thousands of operating satellites in low and medium Earth orbit, on which so much of contemporary life depends. Their security will not be increased by the proliferation of space weaponry

or the increasing militarization of near-Earth space. On the contrary: any physical attack on anybody's satellite would result in a sudden new cloud of space debris that would potentially disable everybody's satellites, adversaries, allies, and ourselves alike. The United States operates nearly half the world's satellites. No matter who struck the first blow, actual space war would pose a greater threat to us than to any other country on the planet. It could send daily life back to the days of the typewriter and the traveling salesman. Every modernized country needs to help keep things calm up there in near-Earth space. One obvious way to do so is by working together.

Enter the United Nations, specifically the foundational UN Outer Space Treaty of 1967, signed by the US and more than a hundred other nations. The mission of the US Space Force heads in a very different direction from that treaty. According to its own Fact Sheet, the Space Force is intended to protect US interests in space, to provide space capabilities to the combatant armed forces, to acquire military space systems, and to "matur[e] the military doctrine for space power." By contrast, the Outer Space Treaty stipulates that not only the exploration but also the use of outer space be carried on "in the interest of maintaining international peace and security and promoting international cooperation and understanding." This is a call for collaboration and coexistence, not militarization, not weaponization, not "projecting military power in, from, and to space in support of our Nation's interests."

Warfighting. Strength. Power. Dominance. This brings us right back to the present moment in the United States, when the word "dominate" has been prominent in the discourse.

- On June 1, Trump called America's governors and harangued them for 55 minutes, telling them, "You have to dominate, if you don't dominate you're wasting your time. They're going to run over you, you're going to look like a bunch of jerks. You have to dominate."
- On the same call, the current Secretary of Defense told the governors something he would soon regret: "We need to dominate the battlespace." He was talking about the cities of America.
- The following day, June 2, after protesters near the White House were attacked with what are officially called "less-lethal weapons" so that Trump could walk to a boarded-up church and be

photographed holding a Bible aloft as though it were an item on auction, the current occupant of the Oval Office tweeted: “D.C. had no problems last night. Many arrests. Great job done by all. Overwhelming force. Domination.”

That same day, on the website of THE ATLANTIC, the 17th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff declared he was “sickened” by Trump’s “stunt,” that “[o]ur fellow citizens are not the enemy,” and that “American cities and towns . . . are not ‘battle spaces’ to be dominated, and must never become so.” The next day, on the same platform, the previous Secretary of Defense published his views: “We must reject any thinking of our cities as a “battlespace” that our uniformed military is called upon to “dominate.” . . . Militarizing our response . . . sets up a conflict—a false conflict—between the military and civilian society. It erodes the moral ground that ensures a trusted bond between men and women in uniform and the society they are sworn to protect, and of which they themselves are a part.”

As are we all -- including the cops -- for better or for worse.

*Avis Lang is the coauthor, with Neil deGrasse Tyson, of ACCESSORY TO WAR: The Unspoken Alliance Between Astrophysics and the Military (W. W. Norton, 2018).*