Space Force Déjà Vu

In mid-March 2018, President Trump signaled his intention to fundamentally reform the Department of Defense. Stating unequivocally that "space is a war-fighting domain, just like the land, air and sea," he would push for "a military space force that would be the orbital equivalent of the Army, Air Force and Navy."[1] The remarks were dismissed by much of the press as an admitted continuation of a joke—and unlikely given the strong resistance to a proposed Space Corps by the secretaries of defense and the Air Force in testimony before Congress just a few months earlier. Former NASA director Sean O'Keefe called the proposal a massively unnecessary expense and "bureaucratic nightmare." He added that some may fear "a space force would compromise the sanctity of considering space to be off limits from warfare."[2]

Nonetheless, the president directed the National Space Council, led by Vice President Mike Pence, to coordinate a plan to implement his vision. In August, Pence detailed the way forward. The Pentagon would prepare for a sixth branch of the armed forces, a Department of the Space Force, by 2020. The process would be fast but incremental, including three components: a reestablished combatant command—US Space Command (USSPACECOM), a space operations force, and a joint space development agency. Specifically, USSPACECOM "will establish unified command and control for our Space Force operations, ensure integration across the military, and develop the space warfighting doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures of the future." The space operations force will comprise "an elite group of joint warfighters, specializing in the domain of space," while the space development agency "will ensure the men and women of the Space Force have the cutting-edge warfighting capabilities that they need and deserve."[3]

In February 2019, the Department of Defense sent its proposed space force plan to Congress for approval. This proposal scales back the idea of a separate but equal department into a modified space corps within the Air Force. It confounds space advocates who might interpret it as bureaucratic largess intended to undermine full independence. While the proposal appears to fall well short of the president's initial vision, it is certainly more attainable in the near term and a less radical excision. The DOD plan would also be historically fast. According to the vice president, the fundamental resources are already in place across the other services and intelligence

agencies, and it will be "built on the lessons of the past."[4] Indeed, one thing is certain about these developments: we've been down this road before.

The Ghosts of Space Force Past

In the spring of 1981, defense officials in the new Reagan administration began circulating support for a fresh look at space organizational structure that would ultimately lead to a new combatant command—US Space Command. The soaring costs and inefficiencies of space systems acquisition, the mess of some 50 uncoordinated military organizations working with pieces of the space enterprise, and the rise of a Soviet program that appeared to be racing ahead in military space war-fighting capabilities fueled frustrations that led to a call for action. In September 1981, the Air Force added a fifth subunit to its planning staff, the Directorate of Space Operations, to provide options. Still, as is often the case with large bureaucracies, meaningful change required a push from the outside. In late 1981, House Resolution 5130 required the US Air Force to report to Congress on the feasibility of establishing a space command.[5]

The DOD strongly opposed the move on the grounds it was not needed, would duplicate bureaucracies, and would cost too much. In January 1982, a General Accounting Office report undercut those arguments. It suggested that a separate space command coordinating all military space activities could instead result in overall cost savings; specialization was in fact the foundation of organizational efficiency. Thus, in June 1982, the USAF revealed it would establish a subordinate Space Command in Colorado Springs no later than September.[6] Two years later, the colocated US Space Command was inaugurated. By the end of the decade, the commander of USSPACECOM (dual-hatted as commander of the North American Aerospace Defense Command [NORAD]) gained authority over all military space operations, took command of land-based ballistic missile responsibilities from Strategic Air Command, secured authority over nascent computer operations (the precursor to today's Cyber Command), inaugurated a war-fighting space operations center, and created a Joint Space Intelligence Center.[7] Such rapid evolution perhaps went too far toward an independent space service and in the process threatened entrenched bureaucratic constituencies.

The spectacularly successful space debut in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm prompted the Air Force to seek even greater control of the space mission. Not unnoticed was the fact that by the mid-1990s, the space-specific portion of the DOD budget had approached $10 billion, with upwards of 85 percent earmarked for the Air Force. A similar amount

was distributed to government and intelligence agencies, for an average of $18 billion annually.[8] The 1998 Rumsfeld Commission warned of a "space Pearl Harbor" due to a lack of emphasis on space and recommended a gradual evolution toward a separate Space Corps within the Air Force as an intermediary step on the path to a separate Space Department. However, despite the commission's recommendations, USSPACECOM authorities were steadily transferred elsewhere. Following the events of September 11, 2001, all DOD efforts not focused on the global war on terrorism were subordinated. NORAD moved under the new North American Command, and all duties not already purged were subsumed by Strategic Command. In 2002, USSPACECOM was disbanded, and Air Force Space Command became the de facto US Space Force.[9]

Déjà Vu in 2017

In 2017, Cong. Mike Rogers (R-AL), chair of the House Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittee, became concerned that America now faced multiple near-peer competitors in space despite a perceived insurmountable advantage a generation earlier. Implicitly accusing the USAF of diverting space funds to priority air projects and mismanagement of other space resources, Rogers and ranking Democrat Jim Cooper (D-TN) inserted language into the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) directing that an autonomous Space Corps be established within the Air Force similar to the Marine Corps–Navy arrangement.[10] The measure passed the House but was tabled for future consideration in the Senate pending further study. The DOD and the Air Force continued to resist the proposal, marshalling precisely the same arguments the US Army used in its attempts to retain the Army Air Forces after WWII. Demonstrating an astonishing lack of historical acumen, in congressional testimony the Air Force argued that an independent separate Space Corps would take away from AFSPACECOM's primary functions in support of terrestrial forces best coordinated by an air-minded commander, create an unnecessary parallel bureaucracy, and be too expensive.

Although the Trump administration opposed the Rogers-Cooper plan, President Trump one-upped the Space Corps blueprint and surprisingly announced his intention to create a separate and equal *Department* of the Space Force. In June of 2018, Vice President Pence detailed the administration's vision.[11] The USAF would immediately begin comprehensive preparations to split off a coequal Department of the Space Force including a Marine Corps–style independent organizational structure within the Department of the Air Force. It would draft a plan for congressional

budget support and coordinate with other services and national intelligence space cadres for efficiencies.

Now publicly supporting the initiative, USAF leaders continued to privately argue the folly of the move. It would be bureaucratically redundant and wastefully expensive. A memo from the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force was released (or "leaked") stating that a five-year conservative estimate of the additional cost of separating an independent space service would approach $13 billion over five years, "likely to be revised upward."[12]

By October 2018, however, the Air Force leadership appeared to have dropped even veiled opposition. It submitted a viable, comprehensive transition plan for congressional approval at the end of February 2019. Surprisingly, the anticipated cost of the transition would be quite low and bureaucratic overlap remarkably lean. The Pentagon requested just $72 million for fiscal 2020 and just $2 billion over the next five years to stand up a functioning Space Force within the Department of the Air Force.[13] Beginning with less than 200 assigned personnel in the first year, the Space Force should grow to approximately 15,000 military and civilian billets by 2025. When the organization is expected to be fully operational, the Pentagon's plan would stabilize the Space Force budget at about $500 million per year, or "about 0.07 percent of the Defense Department's annual budget."[14]

Critiquing the Launch

It is possible to see several potential pitfalls, some quite counterintuitive, that could jeopardize congressional support and effectively neutralize Space Force independence. An early complaint is that the relatively tiny envisioned Space Force would immediately get equal representation on the Joint Chiefs, including three four-star generals—a chief and vice chief of the Space Force and the commander of US Space Command. By adding several lower-ranking general officers, the Space Force is projected to be the most rank-heavy of the services.[15] In comparison, the USAF has nine four-star billets, not including joint positions, or roughly one for every 76,000 Airmen.[16] Such a force structure could be viewed quite incredulously by the other services.

The small size of the nominally independent Space Force, even at five-year maturity, simply does not reflect the trajectory of a military service that should not only be equal in resources and war-fighting capability to the others in the future but also may become dominant. Under the current proposal, it will remain dwarfed by the Air Force's subordinate Space Command. The USAF currently receives about $15 billion annually for

national security space programs (85 percent of the overall $18 billion DOD space budget)—about 10 percent of its overall budget of $157 billion for FY 2018.[17] Moreover, the current AFSPACECOM has about 30,000 military and civilian personnel. Compared to $500 million earmarked annually for the Space Force after 2025, the USAF still could directly control a space budget 30 times that of its purportedly coequal independent space service. This may not sit well with stanch Space Force advocates.

The comparison of the US Space Force to the US Marines is also rather strained. The Marine Corps is a semi-independent force that controls its own organize, train, and equip requirements and has complete budget authority. The US Navy in FY 2017 had a combined strength of 597,000 active, reserve, and civilian personnel. The Marines had a combined strength of 222,000 active and reserve—more than a third of its parent service. Their independent budgets are proportional to their relative sizes. The top Navy and Marine officers, the chief of naval operations and the commandant of the Marine Corps, report directly to the secretary of the Navy. The chief of the Space Force will report directly to the secretary of the Air Force, and there is currently an under secretary of the Air Force that performs parallel duties to the Navy's under secretary. But the Space Force plan *adds* a second "under secretary of the Space Force" that is "responsible for working with Department of the Air Force officials, as well as other Department of Defense officials, for the overall supervision of space matters."[18] The new under secretary will be subordinate to the under secretary of the Air Force, as the latter is specifically designated "the first assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force."[19] This additional layer of control appears superfluous.

The historic rise and fall of US Space Command as the first gateway to an independent space service highlights several caveats in the proposal. For example, one that should assist in overcoming service resistance is that the "DoD does not intend to transition to the Space Forces those defense missions that are tangentially related with space, such as land- and sea-based nuclear operations, cyberspace operations, and the overall missile defense mission." Unfortunately, the only effective and cost-efficient global missile defense capability, one that protects against all of the nation's and our allies' missile threats, can only be achieved in and from space. While authorities can and do change, this one is problematic.

Additionally, the president's Space Policy Directive 4 (SPD-4) requires the USAF to *periodically* assess whether the time is right to spin off a fully equal and independent *Department* of the Space Force. However, no lan-

guage in SPD-4 or the congressional proposal indicates what *periodically* means or the criteria that must be met to compel it. These decisions are left to the Air Force, which in the past has valued control over the space budget, space facilities, and space personnel. The Space Corps now appears to be a permanent solution, not a transition.

Epilogue

On the whole, the proposal before Congress is reasonable. It follows a rough parallel to the necessary independence of the Air Force from its roots in the Army and could foreshadow a similar path for cyberspace if and when cyber is usefully characterized as a war-fighting domain. None of the flaws identified here are fatal. The DOD should be better off, and military space far better served, five years from now if the plan is implemented. The greatest threat to the current plan is political, not organizational or even financial. The White House is proclaiming that "President Donald J. Trump is Establishing America's Space Force" in a screaming boldface font while some in the media are already decrying the "Trump Space Force."[20] We live in divisive times where successive administrations attempt to undo the achievements of their predecessors. Even though the 2017 Space Corps initiative passed the House with significant bipartisan support and the current plan is essentially the same, a divided Congress may not be able to look past the 2020 elections. It may not vote on the merits of the plan, instead using it as a plebiscite on the administration as a whole. Indeed, opponents of an independent space force could tout it as part of a rollback effort. And that would not serve US interests in space. Since space is a war-fighting domain, an eventual dedicated military service is the most effective means to full national security. SSQ

Everett C. Dolman
Air Command and Staff College

Notes

1. Christina Wilkie, "Trump Floats the Idea of Creating a 'Space Force' to Fight Wars in Space," CNBC, 13 March 2018, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/13/trump-floats-the-idea-of-creating-a-space-force-to-fight-wars-in-space.html; and Seth Borenstein and Ken Thomas, "Star Wars? President Trump Proposes Military Space Force," *US News and World Report*, 13 March 2018, https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2018-03-13/star-wars-president-trump-proposes-military-space-force.
2. Borenstein and Thomas, "Star Wars?"

3. Claudette Roulo, "Space Force to Become Sixth Branch of Armed Forces," *DOD News,* 9 August 2018, https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1598071/space-force-to-become-sixth-branch-of-armed-forces/.

4. Roulo, "Space Force to Become Sixth Branch."

5. Thomas Karas, *The New High Ground* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 17–20; and David Spires, *Beyond Horizons*, rev. ed. (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1998), 188–92.

6. Spires, *Beyond Horizons*, 193–205.

7. Ibid., 217–18. Author's note: The commander usually was commander of USSPACECOM and Air Force Space Command.

8. Amaani Lyle, "Air Force Officials Take Space Budget, Acquisition Strategy to Capitol Hill," *US Air Force News,* 18 March 2011, https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/113903/air-force-officials-take-space-budget-acquisition-strategy-to-capitol-hill/.

9. Gary Shugart, "Re-establishing U.S. Space Command," posted by Purview, *DoDLive* (blog), 1 October 2018, http://purview.dodlive.mil/2018/10/01/reestablishing-u-s-space-command/.

10. Sandra Erwin, "Congressman Rogers: A Space Corps is 'Inevitable,'" *SpaceNews,* December *2017,* https://spacenews.com/congressman-rogers-a-space-corps-is-inevitable/.

11. Associated Press, " 'Space Force': Trump Directs Pentagon to Create New military Branch," *NBC News,* 18 June 2018, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-says-he-directing-pentagon-create-new-military-branch-called-n884361.

12. Marcus Weisgerber, "Air Force Pushes Back on Pentagon's First Blueprints for Trump's Space Force," *Defense One*, 17 September 2018, https://www.defenseone.com/politics/2018/09/creating-space-force-will-cost-13b-ove-5-years-air-force-secretary/151312/; and Sandra Erwin, "Wilson: $13 Billion Space Force Cost Estimate Is 'Convervative,' " *SpaceNews*, 18 September 2018, https://spacenews.com/wilson-13-billion-space-force-cost-estimate-is-conservative.

13. Courtney Albon, "Pentagon Estimates New Space Force Will Cost $2B over Five Years," *Inside Defense*, 27 February 2019, https://insidedefense.com/daily-news/pentagon-estimates-new-space-force-will-cost-2-billion-over-five-years.

14. Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Want to Join the Space Force? There Won't Be an Academy," *ABC News,* 1 March 2019, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/join-space-force-academy/story?id=61411343.

15. Marcus Weisgerber, "Wait, How Many Generals for Space Force?," *Global Business Brief,* 28 February 2019, https://www.defenseone.com/business/2019/02/wait-how-many-generals-space-force-radar-battle-heats-boeings-combat-drones/155204/.

16. Weisgerber, "Wait, How Many Generals?"

17. Todd Harrison, "Why We Need a Space Force," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 3 October 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-we-need-space-force; https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/113903/air-force-officials-take-space-budget-acquisition-strategy-to-capitol-hill/.

18. Proposed revisions to Title X and proposed Title XVII—Space Force, Sec. 1702, "Under Secretary of the Air Force for Space."

19. Proposed revisions to Title X and proposed Title XVII.

20. The White House, "President Donald J. Trump Is Establishing America's Space Force," fact sheet, 19 February 2019, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-trump-establishing-americas-space-force/; and "Trump to Establish Space Force as Sixth Military Branch," CNBC, video, 01:18, 18 June 2018, https://www.cnbc.com/video/2018/06/18/trump-space-force-sixth-military-branch.html.