

Neocons in Space: Pre-emptive War Goes Interplanetary

The Privatization of Government Space Projects

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Welcome to a radical new vision of space and the future, from the same crowd that brought you Iraq. In a little-noted policy document, the Bush Administration has unilaterally declared its right to conduct pre-emptive attacks on foreign spacecraft and on any objects or installations that might support them from the ground. It has also declared its opposition to international treaties that might restrict space exploration to primarily peaceful purposes.

These policies could have disastrous consequences right here on Earth someday.

They've also committed themselves to privatizing government space projects, an initiative that could hand billions more tax dollars to the usual set of government beneficiaries. And they emphasize nuclear power in space – ironically, on the same day that Americans learned of [hundreds of cancer deaths](#) from a nuclear accident in Southern California – deaths that were covered up by the U.S. government and its contractor Boeing.

But the new directive's biggest change from previous space policies is in its emphasis on war. While it supports some positive goals, its militaristic statements have the effect of declaring a "New Space Order."

One thing the world should have learned by now is to take the syndicate now in power at its word. Their blue-sky academic exercises in re-imagining the Middle East led to a catastrophic war in Iraq. Theoretical discussions about abrogation of American rights resulted in the creation of barbed-wire 'Free Speech Zones,' the dismantling of habeus corpus, and the assertion of a unilateral right to spy on our country's own citizens.

That means that a recent [Presidential Directive on National Space Policy](#) (pdf file) should be considered a serious declaration of purpose. Steven Aftergood of the FAS Project on Government Secrecy describes the policy as "assertive." That's an understatement.

First, after a few bromides about the peaceful use of space, the document declares a new emphasis on militarization by declaring that those 'peaceful purposes' "allow U.S. defense and intelligence-related activities in pursuit of national interests." Then comes this important statement:

"The United States considers space capabilities — including the ground and space segments and supporting links — vital to its national interests. Consistent with this policy, the United States will: preserve its rights, capabilities, and freedom of action in space; dissuade or deter others from

either impeding those rights or developing capabilities intended to do so; take those actions necessary to protect its space capabilities; respond to interference; and deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to U.S. national interests”

Note that each of these statements is sweeping in nature. Terms like “adversary,” “deter,” “deny,” and “those actions necessary” are undefined. This paragraph asserts an unlimited U.S. right to act pre-emptively against the space capability of any nation who it chooses to label an adversary or a threat.

What could those acts actually be? There are only a few possibilities. One would be to use ground, air, or space-based weaponry (e.g. missiles, ‘killer satellites’) to ‘take out’ satellites or even space stations placed by a foreign power. Another, more threatening possibility, is that the U.S. could unilaterally ‘deny the use of space capabilities’ by bombing a launching facility or staging area. A third possibility is the destruction of research facilities in order to prevent a nation from ‘developing capabilities’ for hostile space flight.

Presumably the ‘one-percent doctrine’ would also apply here. If there is a one-percent possibility that another nation might use its space capability against the US, *even to defend itself*, pre-emptive attacks could be undertaken.

This last point is critical. The Administration is asserting its right to deny any country its own space-based defense capability, while continuing to pour millions into this technology (which has proved spectacularly unsuccessful to date).

Only a few countries are capable of implementing such technology right now, the likeliest of which is Russia. The President’s claim represents, in effect, a re-establishment of the Cold War and a declaration of his unilateral right to move beyond the spirit of those treaties that helped end it.

The Directive also dismisses the central role of treaties in preserving peaceful coexistence in space, saying instead that “the United States ... *rejects any limitations on the fundamental right of the United States to operate in and acquire data from space,*” adding:

“Proposed arms control agreements or restrictions must not impair the rights of the United States to conduct research, development, testing, and operations or other activities in space for U.S. national interests”

There are good arguments to be made for taking an aggressive (excuse me, ‘assertive’) stand in favor of our right to conduct espionage and other defense-related activities from space-based platforms. But it’s a long leap from that position to the one in this Directive, which closes the door on future agreements that might be in the interests of the U.S.

This Directive is yet another example of contempt for diplomacy, and for a lack of skill and knowledge in the field of negotiation. (See [Kathleen Reardon](#).) Strong and smart negotiators don’t telegraph their position before starting to talk, nor do they box themselves into a corner with bellicose statements. The watchword of a good negotiator is “Don’t talk before you talk.” They fail to heed this good advice – but then, negotiation isn’t the objective.

Even from a hawkish point of view, the bellicose statements are foolish. If you perceive a

real threat at some point, you can always choose to act. But warlike statements only serve to limit a government's options – or to make it appear weak should it choose *not* to act.

The underlying purpose of the Directive, however, is to declare a “New American Century” and assume the rights of empire – in this case, in space. But ‘Star Wars’ fans will tell you what can happen when someone tries to assert imperial power across the dominion of space.

The privatization of the space effort is spelled out here, too. “Departments and agencies shall use commercial space capabilities and services to *the maximum practical extent*, purchase commercial capabilities and services when they are available in the commercial marketplace ... continue to include and increase U.S. private sector participation in design and development,” and “refrain from conducting activities that preclude, deter, or compete with U.S. commercial space activities, unless required by national security or public safety.”

In other words, the U.S. space program must now use the same procurement policies that brought you Halliburton, Blackwater, lost billions in Iraq, and faulty body armor. If nothing else, the Republicans are consistent to a fault in their desire to enrich a small group of contractors.

There are some good things in the Directive, too. The development of a healthy private-sector space industry is, in fact, a good goal for U.S. public policy – provided that it's balanced by strong oversight and supported with public-sector research that's available to all Americans.

The Directive encourages the development of more American space professionals, and emphasizes stronger research and development initiatives. These are also excellent objectives. It emphasizes “... a sustained and affordable human and robotic program of space exploration” for scientific research – although most space scientists would rather leave the emphasis on “robotic” exploration, which is a much more cost-effective way of advancing human knowledge.

When it comes to the militaristic threats and plans, however, it's important to take it very seriously when the Republicans make statements of this kind. Day after day they're working in think tanks across the country, envisioning the world as they'd like to see it. Then they put their theories into action in the real-world. This Directive is a glimpse into their thinking. Therefore, it's a glimpse of a possible dark future where pre-emptive space conflict triggers earthbound war – possibly with a nuclear superpower.

Democrats and other groups should take the lead in articulating an alternative vision for space – one that includes scientific research, improvement in U.S. research capabilities, development of new technologies, and the novel uses of space by individuals, organizations, and commercial interests. All of this can be accomplished with an emphasis on peaceful international collaboration, while at the same time reserving the right to use space as part of our array of defense capabilities.

Until that vision is articulated and implemented, however, take note: today's policy statement is tomorrow's reality.

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