

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

The Command of Space

REVERSING decades of tradition and doctrine, the Air Force announced in 1988 that it would regard space as a mission, not just a place. In the military scheme of things, space had long been seen as interesting and exotic but essentially peripheral. The announcement gave space some added clout in planning, programming, and budgeting, but it did not change attitudes overnight.

More than anything else, it was the Persian Gulf War that finally brought recognition and respect. Satellites were everywhere, doing almost everything. They provided target intelligence, spotted Scud launches, and carried eighty percent of the communications. Navstar GPS became a legend as it fed navigation signals to aircraft, tanks, and trucks. Space moved from marginal status to a position of indispensable support.

The next phase of the metamorphosis is under way. Space is becoming truly operational. One of the main predictions of "Air Force 2025," a speculative analysis just completed by Air University, is that "the medium for Air Force operations will move from the air and space toward space and air."

The Air Force has begun to prepare carefully for the eventuality that military operations—and probably combat—are going to occur in space. Some twenty nations will have space-based capabilities by 2000, with others in line to join the throng. As dependencies and threats in space intensify, the clash of interests is inevitable.

Missions of the joint-service US Space Command are performed largely by Air Force Space Command, which provides most of the money and most of the force structure and which launches and operates more than ninety percent of all Department of Defense space assets. However, efforts to get the space mission assigned to the Air Force have failed. The other services perceive the importance of space and want to keep their seats at the table. Joint command with the Air Force first among equals seems acceptable, though,

and that is where the organizational arrangement stands.

There are two "old" missions in space, neither of them inherently controversial:

■ **Space forces support** is the launching and operation of satellites and spacecraft. Cost and delay problems still exist, but there has been some progress, and more is on the way when the Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle, now in development, is ready.

■ **Spacebased force enhancement** provides surveillance, navigation, communications, and weather information to fighting forces for threat

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warning, battle management, command and control, and other purposes.

It is two "new" military missions in space that bid to drive doctrinal change over the next ten to twenty-five years:

■ **Space force application** is military action in space with a direct effect on Earth. It includes exploring of technology for global precision strikes from or through space. Force-application missions might also be flown by a transatmospheric "aerospace plane," manned or unmanned, that could take off on demand, overfly any location in the world, and return to its base. There are no force-application assets in space today, but groundbased ICBMs—which follow a suborbital trajectory through space and which are now part of Space Command—can be seen as a bridge toward this mission.

■ **Space control** means protecting our ability to use space, preventing adversaries from interfering with that use, and negating an adversary's ability to exploit its own space forces.

"Undoubtedly, the most provocative subject in any discussion of the future of space is the subject of weapons and the likelihood of their use," says Gen. Thomas S. Moorman, Jr., Air Force vice chief of staff, a distinguished veteran of the space campaigns. "Here, I am referring to the broadest categories: spacebased lasers to shoot down hostile ICBMs, space weapons that attack other satellites, or weapons released from space platforms that destroy terrestrial targets. Today, these kinds of systems clearly break the current thresholds of acceptability and introduce Antiballistic Missile Treaty issues and social and political reservations. But the twenty-first century could well see a change."

That might happen because the necessities of everyday life and our economic and commercial interests have become so linked to space that we cannot allow an adversary to control it. It might also be that perspectives on space control will change as the ballistic missile threat proliferates and worsens or as other threats appear.

In preparation against that day, an operational culture permeates the Space Command complex at Colorado Springs. Its representatives attend the semiannual coordination meetings of the combat air forces. The firmly rooted view is that the Air Force of the future will be instantly aware, globally dominant in air and space, and omnipresent with spacebased sensors and weapons.

It is ironic that this would probably mean the redesignation of space as a place—specifically as an "area of responsibility" or operational combat theater in the lexicon of the unified command structure. Space Command would thereby gain a "supported" role rather than being constrained to a "supporting" one, as now.

The Air Force has been the lead service in space since the 1950s, and it must continue to lead the way as the United States moves toward the command of space in the opening years of the next century. ■