

The Militarization of Outer Space: The Pentagon's "Space Warriors"

Air Force Raises the Stakes for a New Arms Race

By [Tom Burghardt](#)

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It's not as if things aren't bad enough right here on planet earth.

What with multiple wars and occupations, an accelerating economic meltdown, corporate malfeasance and environmental catastrophes such as the petroleum-fueled apocalypse in the Gulf of Mexico, I'd say we have a full plate already.

Now the Defense Department wants to up the stakes with new, destabilizing weapons systems that will transform low- and high-earth orbit into another "battlespace," pouring billions into programs to achieve what Air Force Space Command ([AFSPC](#)) has long dreamed of: "space dominance."

Indeed, Pentagon space warriors fully intend to field a robust anti-satellite (ASAT) capability that can disable, damage or destroy the satellites of other nations, all for "defensive" purposes, mind you.

Back in 2005, [The New York Times](#) reported that General Lance W. Lord, then commander of AFSPC, told an Air Force conference that "space superiority is not our birthright, but it is our destiny. ... Space superiority is our day-to-day mission. Space supremacy is our vision for the future."

Five years on, that "mission" is still a top priority for the Obama administration. While some might call it "net-centric warfare" on steroids, I'd choose another word: madness.

Air Force X-37B

On April 22, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) successfully launched its robot space shuttle, the X-37B Orbital Test Vehicle (OTV), from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida.

Sitting atop a Lockheed Martin Atlas V rocket, the unmanned, reusable space plane roared into orbit after more than ten years of development by Boeing Corporation's "Phantom Works" black projects shop.

The successful orbital insertion of the X-37B was the culmination of a decades' long dream by the Department of Defense: to field a reusable spacecraft that combines an airplane's agility with the means to travel at 5 miles per second in orbit.

From the Pentagon's point of view, a craft such as the X-37B may be the harbinger of things to come: a johnny-on-the-spot weapons platform to take out the satellite assets of an enemy

de jour, or as a launch vehicle that can deliver bombs, missiles or kinetic weapons anywhere on earth in less than two hours; what Air Force wags refer to as “operationally responsive space.”

Prior to launch, Air Force Deputy Undersecretary of Space Programs, Gary Payton, ridiculed speculation that the X-37B is the prototype for a new space-based weapons system. Payton told reporters, “I don’t know how this could be called a weaponization of space. Fundamentally, it’s just an updated version of the space shuttle kinds of activities in space.”

Needless to say, such denials should be taken with the proverbial grain of salt.

The highly-classified program has a checkered history. According to [GlobalSecurity.org](https://www.globalsecurity.org/), the project is envisaged as a “reusable space architecture” that would provide “aircraft-like operability, flexibility, and responsiveness, supporting AF Space Command mission areas.”

While early examples such as the Dyna-Soar/X-20 program of the 1950s-1960s never panned out due to technological constraints, the Air Force never stopped trying. Programs such as the X-40 Space Maneuver Vehicle (SMV) and the X-41 Common Air Vehicle (CAV), a hypersonic craft intended to serve as a key component in developing the off-again, on-again “Prompt Global Strike” project, demonstrate continuing Air Force interest in “high frontier” weapons programs.

The X-40 project eventually merged with the Air Force’s X-37B program and the X-41 CAV program has been absorbed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency’s ([DARPA](https://www.darpa.mil/)) Falcon Hypersonic Technology Vehicle ([HTV-2](https://www.darpa.mil/program/falcon-hypersonic-technology-vehicle)).

Last month, the first test of the Falcon (apparently) ended in failure when DARPA researchers claimed they had lost contact with the craft moments after take-off from Vandenberg Air Force Base. The Falcon was supposed to demonstrate the feasibility of launching a vehicle to the edge of space and then have it come “screaming back into the atmosphere, maneuvering at twenty times the speed of sound before landing north of the Kwajalein Atoll, 30 minutes later and 4100 nautical miles away,” according to [Wired](https://www.wired.com/).

Did the HTV-2 mission fail? Since misdirection and disinformation have long been staples of Pentagon black world projects, most likely we’ll never know one way or the other.

Inevitably, even if these projects amount to no more than monumental failures, their intended target audience, China, Russia or any other nation viewed as a “rogue state” by the imperialist hyperpower, in all likelihood would be drawn in to an expensive, and deadly, contest to devise countermeasures.

In this light, [Space.com](https://www.space.com/) reporter Jeremy Hsu wrote May 5, that ambiguities in devising militarized space technology “can make it tricky for nations to gauge the purpose or intentions behind new prototypes.” And such uncertainties are precisely the fodder that fuel an arms race.

According to [GlobalSecurity.org](https://www.globalsecurity.org/)’s John Pike, the U.S. military “could even be using the cloak of mystery to deliberately bamboozle and confuse rival militaries.” Pike told [Space.com](https://www.space.com/) that “the X-37B and HTV-2 projects could represent the tip of a space weapons program hidden within the Pentagon’s secret ‘black budget,’ or they might be nothing more than smoke and mirrors.”

Pike said that current work “leaves plenty of room for misinterpretation or even outright deception, which could be a ploy to distract other nations with military space projects.”

“‘One of them could be a deception program and the other could be the spitting image of the real thing,’ Pike noted. He said that such misdirection could force other nations’ militaries to waste money chasing down dead ends.”

While Pike’s assertions sound plausible, given the Pentagon’s track record and an annual \$50 billion black budget directed towards research on new weapons and surveillance systems, the X-37B, the Falcon HTV-2 or other systems on the drawing board would certainly be useful assets if the military chose to deploy them as offensive weapons.

A Space Bomber?

Less ambitious perhaps, but potentially more destabilizing than unproven hypersonic technology, the X-37B was originally designed by Boeing for NASA in 1999 as an emergency escape vehicle for the International Space Station.

The civilian agency once viewed the craft as a potential lifeboat that could rescue stranded astronauts from the ISS. However, with Russia’s Soyuz space capsule doing yeoman’s work for just such a contingency, NASA no longer saw the need for an expensive winged re-entry vehicle and dropped the program.

But, as with all things having to do with the Military-Industrial Complex’s insatiable appetite for new weapons, DARPA, the Pentagon’s “blue sky” geek shop, picked up the slack in 2004 when NASA headed towards the exit.

After further testing and design enhancements by DARPA, the project was handed off to the Air Force in 2006. The program is now run by the USAF’s secretive Rapid Capabilities Office ([RCO](#)) and spokespeople there have been tight lipped, refusing to say how much the vehicle costs; a sure sign that funds for the robot shuttle come from the black side of the budget where new weapons systems spawn and metastasize.

A tip-off to the covert nature—and militaristic intentions—of the program, comes from the office running the show. According to an Air Force [Fact Sheet](#), the RCO “responds to Combat Air Force and combatant command requirements” and “expedites development and fielding of select Department of Defense combat support and weapon systems by leveraging defense-wide technology development efforts and existing operational capabilities.”

According to investigative journalist Sharon Weinberger, the author of *Imaginary Weapons and A Nuclear Family Vacation*, her recent piece in [Popular Mechanics](#), revealed that prior to the Pentagon assuming ownership of the X-37 project, “the spacecraft was regarded as just another experimental prototype.” Today however, Weinberger wrote, “Air Force officials are skittish to mention even the smallest details.”

When Air Force chief scientist Werner J.A. Dahm was asked by Weinberger “what he could say about the X-37B,” he replied, “‘Nothing very useful,’ before quickly changing the subject.”

In a 2006 piece in Air Force Print News ([AFPN](#)) however, we were informed that the X-37B will “will serve as a test platform for satellites and other space technologies. The vehicle allows satellite sensors, subsystems, components and associated technology to be

transported into the environment where they will be used-space.”

With information scarce on what the OTV's current mission is, the Air Force has said that after the first few flights (a second test is slated for 2011), “you get into the realm of using it as a reusable space test platform—putting space components into its experimental bay and taking them to space for testing,” RCO's X-37B program manager Lt. Col. Kevin Walker told AFPN.

While the Air Force has denied that the X-37B is the vanguard for a space-based system to be deployed for spying or as an orbital weapons' delivery platform, and while this may be technically accurate in so far as the mini-shuttle is a prototype, the vagaries of the project raise intriguing questions.

This is borne out by an April 22 [announcement](#) by the 45th Space Wing Public Affairs office at Patrick Air Force base. Deputy Undersecretary Payton said “if these technologies on the vehicle prove to be as good as we estimate, it will make our access to space more responsive, perhaps cheaper, and push us in the vector toward being able to react to warfighter needs more quickly.”

This was seconded by Col. André Lovett, 45th Space Wing vice commander: “This launch helps ensure that our warfighters will be provided the capabilities they need in the future.”

Nothing ambiguous in these statements as to how the USAF views the future role for the system, nor do they bear a relationship to Payton's earlier claim to reporters that the X-37B is “just an updated version of the space shuttle kinds of activities in space.”

Weinberger notes that “the most daring job of a space plane, and the one least discussed, is the role of a bomber.” According to Weinberger, the X-37B “could fly over targets within an hour of launch to release cone-shaped re-entry vehicles that would both protect and guide weapons through the atmosphere.” Equally destabilizing, a craft such as the X-37B “could carry 1000- or 2000-pound re-entry vehicles armed with precision munitions like bunker-busting penetrators or small-diameter bombs, or simply use the explosive impact of kinetic rods cratering at hypersonic speeds to destroy targets.”

Joan Johnson-Freese, a Professor of National Security Studies at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, told [Space.com](#) journalist Leonard David last month that “other countries” will likely view the X-37B “as another capability intended to assure the United States will be able to dominate access to and the use of space.”

William Scott, coauthor of the militaristic novel *Counterspace: The Next Hours of World War III*, told David that a reusable space plane “could deliver small satellites having specific, limited roles to bridge critical capabilities gaps.”

The former bureau chief for Aviation Week & Space Technology told David that amongst the most vital characteristics for fielding a weapons' platform such as the X-37B is surprise: “On the first orbit, a space plane could capture data, before the ‘target’ knew it was coming.” Since a space plane could be “launched into any orbit, at any inclination, providing prompt ‘eyes-on’ of virtually any area of the world,” unlike a satellite with known, predictable trajectories, it could also be used as a surveillance platform or even as a means to surreptitiously “kidnap” or disable an adversary's satellite.

Seconding Weinberger's assessment, Scott told [Space.com](#) that “ultimately, weapons could

be delivered from a space plane in low Earth orbit.” As noted above, these could come in the form of “precision” munitions or insane hypervelocity rod bundles, so called “Rods from God,” tungsten projectiles lobbed from space at 36,000 feet per second that can “hit a cross-haired target on the ground.”

“I did a story about the rods concept in 1994 or 1995, based on concepts being discussed in the U.S. Air Force at the time,” Scott said. “Fifteen years later, maybe they’re ready for testing.”

This view is shared by Everett Dolman, a professor of Comparative Military Studies at the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies at the Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama.

“Regardless of its original intent, Dolman told Space.com, “the most obvious and formidable is in service as a space fighter—a remotely piloted craft capable of disabling multiple satellites in orbit on a single mission and staying on orbit for months to engage newly orbited platforms.” A project such as the X-37B, more advanced systems still on the drawing-board or in development in any number of Air Force black sites such as Groom Lake (Area 51) “would be a tremendous tactical advantage,” Dolman said.

Even were the system not to be transformed into a space bomber, Dolman theorized that the X-37B could be maneuvered close to an adversary’s satellite and capture details in the form of signals intelligence. “With the anticipated increase in networked-microsatellites in the next few years, such a platform might be the best—and only—means of collecting technical intelligence in space.”

While the system may evolve into a destabilizing new weapon, Dolman said that “all of the information leaked about the X-37B suggests its primary function will be as a test platform, but a test platform for what?”

Regardless of how the X-37B prototype pans out, we can be certain that as the U.S. imperialist empire continues its long trek on the road towards failed statehood, the Pentagon, always eager to expend the blood and treasure of the American people on endless wars of conquest, will continue to build new and ever-more destabilizing weapons.

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