

Ego Trip: US Space Flags and Super-Duper Missiles

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US President Donald Trump is much taken with the bombastic and the exaggerated. In [an interview](#) with the Associated Press in April 2017, he spoke of his infamous if somewhat less than successful wall project on the US-Mexican border. Ever happy to stretch the record on costs, he took issue with those “opponents talking \$25 billion for the wall. It’s not going to cost anywhere near that.” Resembling that noisy relative who boasts about getting a cheaper deal for you on anything from car insurance to white goods, the president was confident: “I think \$10 billion or less. And if I do a super-duper, higher, better, better security, everything else, maybe it goes a little bit more.”

In the year of an election, things are not looking rosy at the White House, neither super, let alone duper, but that is hardly an excuse not to embark on ego trips of extravagant optimism. Amidst the rising death toll in the United States due to coronavirus, military matters still have to be tended to. The signing of the 2020 Armed Forces Day Proclamation [provided a chance](#) for the Trump administration to reveal the flag for the US Space Force. “We’ve worked very hard on this and it’s so important from a defensive standpoint, from an offensive standpoint, from every standpoint there is.”

For the White House, the deep blue and sharp white colours of the flag represented the “vast recesses of outer space”. It was unfurled and ready, raised against those dastardly adversaries who, [according](#) to Secretary of Defence Mark Esper, had “weaponized space” and “made it a war fighting domain.”

The flag had caused a tittle of offence with its approval in January this year. *New York Times* reporter Sopan Deb lost his bearings on Twitter, [shouting](#) about its resemblance to the Starfleet logo of *Star Trek*. Actors such as George Takei, who featured in the original show run, saw little merit in the flattery of such theme-pinching inspiration. “Is nothing sacred?” (He [promptly](#) turned his thespian head to more earthly matters: royalties might be in order.)

The president [also claimed](#) during the ceremony that the United States was developing an exhilarating, novel weapon. “I call it the ‘super-duper missile’. And I heard the other night, 17 times faster than what they have right now.” Not exactly solid on his avionics, the president observed that Russia “has five times, and China is working on five or six times”. (What times? Sound?)

In February, Trump was also very much enchanted by the speedy missile theme. “We have the super-fast missiles,” he [explained](#) to governors visiting the White House, “tremendous number of the super-fast. We call them ‘super-fast,’ where they’re four, five, six and even seven times faster than an ordinary missile. We need that because, again, Russia has some. I won’t tell you how they got it.” Not being able to restrain himself, Trump continued

to explain. “They got it, supposedly, from plans from the Obama administration when we weren’t doing it. And that’s too bad.”

Trump might not have been briefed by the more specific advances made by the Russian military in this field. In December 2018, Russia supposedly tested the Avangard hypersonic vehicle, which claimed to go to speeds up to 27 times the speed of sound. “The Avangard,” Russian President Vladimir Putin [boasted](#), “is invulnerable to intercept by any existing and prospective weapon defence means of the potential adversary.” The Kinzhal design, with a speed greater than Mach 10, [is said](#) to be even more agile.

Trump loathes the burdens of the technical, preferring the simplified language of the MBA (mediocre-but-ambitious) set. Such missiles are better known as hypersonic weapons, which have been preoccupying US officials for some time. “Our goal is, simply,” in the frank observation of Mark Lewis, the Pentagon’s director of defense and research engineering for modernization, “to dominate future battlefields.” The Pentagon’s [budget](#) for the 2021 financial year for all research related to hypersonic weaponry is \$3.2 billion, with \$206.8 million specifically dedicated to hypersonic defence programs.

The line between sensible defence and testosterone strutting is a hard to discern in military matters. New weapons are often developed to reassure the tribal establishment of their necessity. Others have them and so must we. The ego’s urges must be pacified. “We have no choice,” [contends](#) Trump. “We have to do it - with the adversaries we have out there.”

The hypersonic weapon tickles the tribe in various ways: it is ferociously fast and highly manoeuvrable. Being hard to detect, such vehicles are a challenge to destroy. Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former Commander of US Strategic Command General John Hyten [sees their value](#) in enabling “responsive, long-range, strike options against distant, defended, and/or time-critical threats [such as road-mobile missiles] when other forces are unavailable, denied access, or not preferred.”

The critics, who tend to be muffled in their assessments of such programs, suggest that having such weapons is an expensive exercise in futility. In [the words](#) of a Congressional Research Service report, they “lack defined mission requirements, contribute little to US military capability, and are unnecessary for deterrence.”

Certain military obsessives feel that Trump is on to a good thing. Ryan P. Burke of the US Air Force Academy has snootily [dismissed](#) the mockers and the knockers. “Between the Twitter jokes and the media’s fixation on missile development and soundbites, the public narrative is missing the point: The super duper missile is a super duper necessity to deal with the super duper Russian threat in the Arctic.”

To develop such weapons is, according to Burke, “important for a country in third place in the hypersonic race.” He leaves us with no reason why that should be so, other than the fact *they* have it. As with any such analysis, the feeling of being second, let alone third, is monstrously unedifying. It reduces strategists to panic attacks and prolonged periods of sobbing anxiety. Inadequacies must be underlined to increase budgets for the needless. Burke proceeds to earn his keep at the academy by opening the door to binges on weapons acquisition or, as he puts it, the attainment of “weapons parity”. Despite accepting the premise that conventional deterrence is questionable as a principle in an age of mutually assured destruction, he draws from the 2018 [National Defense Strategy](#) as a justification. Super-duper stupidity will get you far in this game.

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