

Weapons in Space: Should Anyone Care?

EDITORIAL

— by Dwight E. Neuenschwander, Southern Nazarene University

On January 31, 1950, an important meeting took place in the White House between President Harry Truman, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Atomic Energy Commission Chairman David Lilienthal, and Defense Secretary Louis Johnson. It had been only five-and-a-half years since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but during the previous year the Soviets had detonated their first fission bomb. A small number of influential voices were pressuring the President to authorize the development of hydrogen bombs. That decision was the purpose of the January 31 meeting at the White House.

Truman listened as Lilienthal described the reasons for not building the H-bomb. He had barely started when the President cut him off with the question, “Can the Russians do it?” When his visitors nodded yes, Truman said, “In that case, we have no choice. We’ll go ahead.” Upon leaving the White House, Lilienthal glanced at his watch. The President had given him seven minutes. Lilienthal wrote in his diary that Truman was, “clearly set on what he was going to do before we set foot inside the door.”[1] The first hydrogen bomb was detonated by the USA on November 1, 1952, vaporizing the Pacific island of Eugelab. The Soviets exploded their first hydrogen bomb the following year. A nuclear arms race was on.

Right or wrong, Truman’s decision was made with little *public* discussion. Before his decision, some meaningful discussion had taken place behind closed doors. The General Advisory Committee (GAC), chaired by J. Robert Oppenheimer, studied the consequences of this proposed “Super” bomb. The GAC unanimously recommended that the United States not build the weapon, noting that only a metropolitan city would present a target size comparable to the bomb’s damage radius, reducing the weapon to an engine of genocide. The public living in those cities had scarce opportunity to participate in any dialogue on whether to build these weapons that would result in similar weapons being aimed at them.

It seems the same closed-door, decision-making process is unfolding yet again, this time on whether to place weapons in orbit above the earth. Space has routinely been used for military communication and reconnaissance, but weapons have never yet been stationed in space. That seems about to change.

According to one of the few articles on this subject, which appeared in the May 18, 2005 issue of *The New York Times*, General Lance Lord recently told Congress that the Air Force believes, “We must establish and maintain space superiority. Simply put, it’s the American way of fighting.” The *Times* also quoted Captain David C. Hardesty of the Naval War College faculty as saying, “There seems little doubt that space-basing of weapons is an accepted fact of the Air force,” and reported that Pete Teets, who stepped down in April 2005 as acting secretary of the Air Force, told a space symposium in 2004 that, “We haven’t reached the point of strafing and bombing from space, nonetheless, we are thinking about those possibilities.”[2] As in 1950, far-reaching decisions are being made by

an elite group of individuals in positions of authority, challenged by precious little public discussion.

It seems that an effective way to discourage the weaponization of space by other nations would be for the USA to take the lead in not doing it. Conversely, history suggests that the way to guarantee the deployment of weapons in space by other nations is for the USA to do so first. Should we “go ahead” just because we—or others—can? Would the reasons given for “going ahead” be convincing to a public that sees a wider vision than the one held by the system’s proponents?

The public must claim the right, and own the responsibility, to question the motives and assumptions of those who are pushing for weapons in space. Because of our physics training and our distribution throughout the larger society, Sigma Pi Sigma members are well-placed to raise a discussion of this topic that links applications of physics to the broader sweep of human values.

Before Lilienthal, Acheson, and Johnson walked across the street for their meeting with President Truman on January 31, 1950, they had agreed to oppose the “Super.” Considering domestic politics, Johnson, however, told Lilienthal, “We must protect the President.” It remained for biographers to note, “It had come to that. The real issues related to national security had been rendered irrelevant by the simplifications imposed by domestic politics.”[3] Domestic politics will not count for much when we look up one day to find the weapons of many nations aimed downward at the heads of our children, and find that it is too late for society to have a conversation about it. How will we explain to them our being content to not ask the searching questions before a decision was made with such irreversible implications?

Intelligent discussion of any controversial issue requires a foundation of reliable information. We offer Dr. Tannenwald’s article (beginning on page 6 in this issue) as an excellent place to begin acquiring such information about the threats posed by weapons in space. We hope that her article will stimulate abundant and thoughtful discussion.

REFERENCES

- [1] K. Bird and M. J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (Knopf, 2005), p. 428.
- [2] There has been some discussion in the popular press of proposals for weapons in space; for example, “Air Force Seeks Bush’s Approval for Space Weapons Programs,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2005 (www.nytimes.com); “Bush opens door to space weapons,” *The West Australian*, Oct. 19, 2006 (www.thewest.com.au). But how often do you see this topic discussed in the editorial page of your local community or campus newspaper?
- [3] Ref. 1, p. 428.

