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WE NEED A SPACE FORCE, IF NOT A 'SPACE FORCE'

No one disputes U.S. has vital interests up there;
the issue is what's the best way to protect them

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

When President Trump directed the Pentagon to establish a "Space Force" in June, editorial cartoonists had a field day. Syndicated cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz, for instance, depicted the president in a flying saucer saying, "I'm like a really intelligent life person!" and "pew pew" as if he were a child firing toy lasers. Nick Anderson of the Washington Post Writers Group drew the president dressed as Buzz Lightyear from Disney's *Toy Story* franchise; "To infinity and beyond!" Trump says as onlookers mutter, "We'll buy you a ticket." And the *Wisconsin State Journal's* Phil Hands sketched Darth Vader in a red "Make the Galaxy Great Again" hat.

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The sci-fi tenor of the idea makes Space Force chuckle-worthy. But if you ask security experts, there's nothing funny about the threats America faces in space.

"In civil society, everybody uses space all day, all the time," says Laura Grego, a senior scientist in the Global Security Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists. GPS, cellphones, weather forecasts and even banking transactions all rely on satellites, she says. "There's so much we take for granted."

The U.S. military likewise is a voracious user of satellites, which allow it to accurately time and position bombs, communicate in remote and contested environments, send instructions to and receive video from drones, detect and neutralize missile launches by enemies, and keep an eye on other countries.

"Space assets are an integral portion of joint and combined operations to achieve the nation's military objectives," says retired lieutenant general David Deptula, dean of the Air Force Association's Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, who used space assets in combat during the Gulf War, the war in Afghanistan and operations in Iraq and Syria.

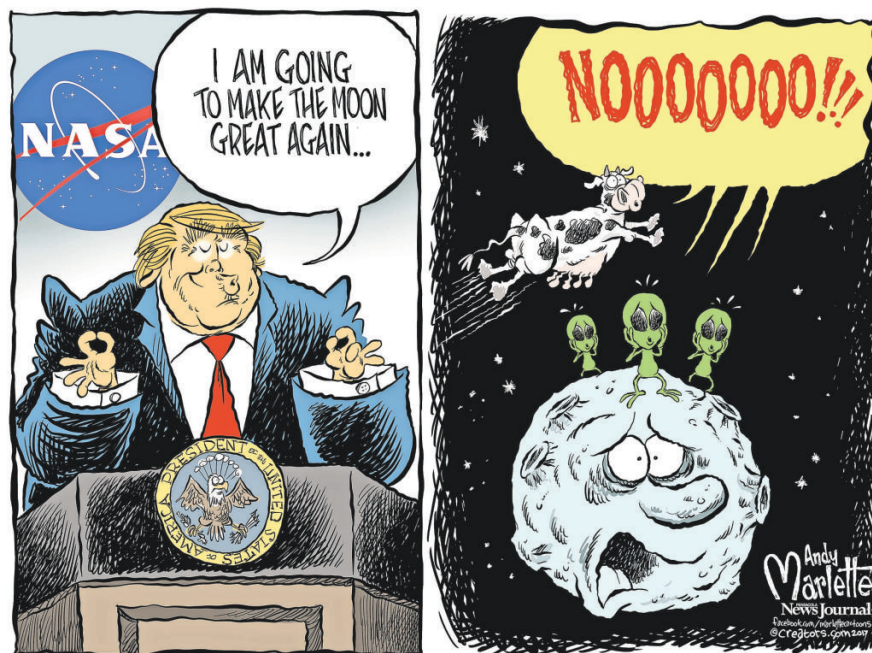
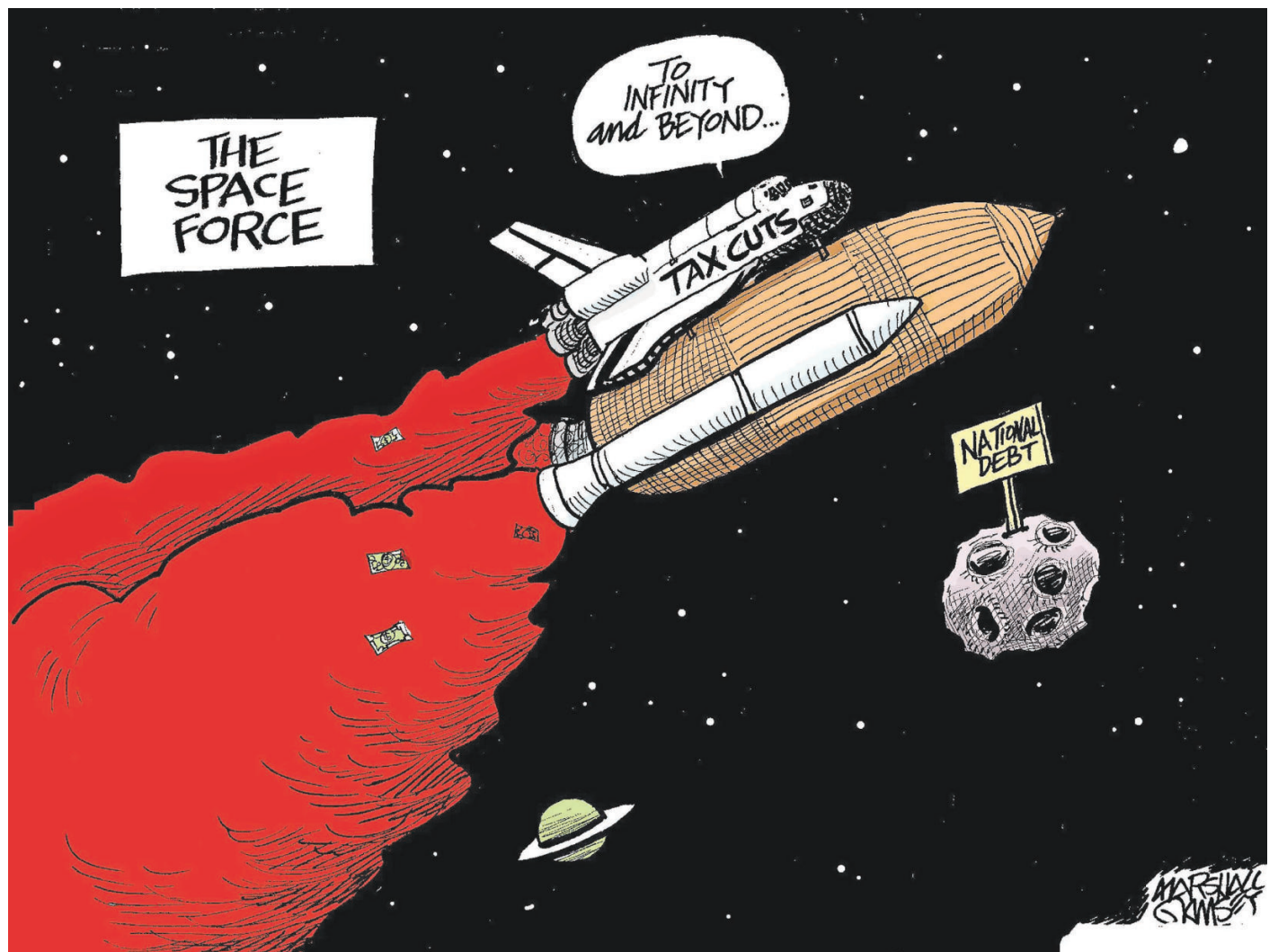
So the question facing the United States is not whether it has assets in space worth protecting. Rather, it's whether a brand new and ill-defined "Space Force" is the right way to protect them.

Air vs. space

While NASA oversees the country's civil space program, military activities related to space are the purview of the Air Force's Space Command. Trump's proposed Space Force would take over its responsibilities, as well as the space-related operations of the other military services.

Consolidating space activities into a new military branch could have several advantages. One, for example, is cohesion.

"The responsibility for building and operating (space assets) is fragmented across the military," says Todd Harrison, director of the Aerospace Security Project at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. With such a division of oversight, he says, the right hand rarely knows what the left hand is doing. "No one is coordinating everything to make



TOP: MARSHALL RAMSEY, THE (JACKSON, MISS.) CLARION-LEDGER;
BOTTOM: ANDY MARLETTE, PENSACOLA (FLA.) NEW JOURNAL

sure all the different pieces of the military space mission are working together effectively and efficiently."

Another advantage could be the creation of a space career track for service-members. Because the Air Force attracts people who want to work in aviation, not space, Harrison says, those in Air Force Space Command often lack space interest and expertise, which limits their effectiveness.

Finally, Harrison says, the Air Force has an inherent conflict of interest. "If you force it to choose between prioritizing the investments it needs to make in air power vs. the investments it needs to make in space, which do you think it's going to choose?" he asked. "The Air Force for good reason has made air dominance its top priority; there is no service that makes space its top priority."

Cosmic concerns

The arguments against a Space Force are just as salient as those for it. Grego, for instance, says it could accelerate the

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militarization of space, either by suggesting to other nations that the United States is pursuing space warfare — therefore prompting them to respond — or by establishing a bureaucracy whose funding and survival might ultimately depend on the proliferation of space-based weapons.

Another concern is that removing Space Command from the Air Force — which enjoys significant resources, experience and clout — could weaken instead of strengthen U.S. space defenses. “There are a lot of people in the Pentagon who think this is a bad idea because it would be disruptive, and because you would end up with a smaller and less influential service than what exists within the Air Force,” Grego says.

Finally, there’s the old adage “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” “The airmen in the Air Force are the ones that have gotten the United States of America to be the No. 1 spacefaring nation in the world,” Deptula says. “So it’s not like the airmen inside the Air Force are neglecting space; my God, we’ve fully embraced it. If the problem is resource allocation, that can be solved easily with the stroke of a pen by our members of Congress.”

A fuzzy future

Speaking of Congress: The fate of the Space Force ultimately lies in its hands.

“The Trump administration wants to create a Space Force, but that requires legislation that Congress has to enact,” Harrison says.

In July, lawmakers reached a deal on a defense-spending bill for fiscal year 2019. Although it directs the Pentagon to “develop a space warfighting policy,” it does not ask it to establish a new military branch.

Still, the president remains bullish on Space Force. In fact, Vice President Mike Pence in August laid out the administration’s plan, which includes four actions it will execute independent of Congress: First, it will establish a Space Development Agency to procure space capabilities across the Department of Defense (DoD). Second, it will create a Space Operations Force that Harrison describes as “an inventory of all the people who work space-related jobs in the military today.” Third, it will ask Congress to authorize creation of the Space Force in next year’s military-spending bill. And finally, it will re-establish U.S. Space Command, a



Vice President Mike Pence speaks about the potential for a new “Space Force” within the military at the Pentagon in September. Most space-related military activities currently are handled by the Air Force, although other branches of the armed forces have various responsibilities. Combining those operations within a single new branch of the military would require approval by Congress, which has so far shown little interest in the idea.

SAUL LOEB, AFP/GETTY IMAGES

command that unified and coordinated services’ space activities from 1985 until 2002, when it was dissolved to accommodate Northern Command, established after 9/11 to support homeland security.

Things have changed

The last of those proposals, at least, is a step on which Space Force skeptics and supporters can both agree. “The reason we eliminated Space Command is that based on the statute back then, we were only allowed 10 Combatant Commands,” says Michael O’Hanlon, a senior foreign policy fellow at the Brookings Institution. Terrorism was a bigger priority than space at the time, he says, so Northern Command replaced Space Command. “Now, 16 years later, we have the rise of China and Russia as effective actors in space ... which doesn’t persuade me that we should create a tiny space service that would be one-tenth the size of the

Marine Corps, but it does persuade me that a Combatant Command focused on space would be even more timely and relevant now than we appreciated it to be in 2002.”

So while the prospects for Space Force remain muddy, military interest in space is crystal clear.

As it turns out, so are the stakes for NASA, whose mission remains independent of the military even as its future appears increasingly reliant on it.

“Since our creation ... 60 years ago, NASA has been a civilian space agency dedicated to peaceful exploration, discovery and research, and that’s how we’ll remain,” reads a statement from the agency.

“Space is vital to the well-being of the United States, so it’s critical to safeguard American interests that operate there, including NASA spacecraft and the International Space Station. We look forward to learning more about the Space Force as the idea is developed.”