

# Was the Space Force a Good Idea?

In December 2019, Congress established the U.S. Space Force as a new military service at the urging of President Trump. On the Space Force's first anniversary, Cato's Eric Gomez hosted a policy forum with experts to assess the Space Force's first year. **Robert Farley** is a senior lecturer in security and diplomacy at the University of Kentucky and author of a Cato policy analysis on the Space Force. **Brian Weeden** is director of program planning at the Secure World Foundation. Both have written extensively on issues of military organization and the role of the military in space.

**ROBERT FARLEY:** I approached this as a question of what the Space Force does and what the Space Force is supposed to do. It's really in terms of thinking not about space in general but about the question of why we need a new military organization and what new military organizations are supposed to do. Creating a new organization is essentially a bureaucratic reform. It is a different way of structuring uniforms, paperwork, and bureaucracy. We should think about the Space Force in those terms as a bureaucratic reform rather than as opening a new avenue in the history of human warfare.

Space was militarized long before the appearance of the Space Force. You could start in World War II with the use of ballistic missiles, but probably a better place to start is in the 1950s with the first use of satellites. Satellites enabled communications, enabled reconnaissance, and enabled people to be connected with one another. And eventually, satellites may enable people to actually fight in space. Right now, effectively the entirety of the modern American military requires unfettered access to space and perhaps even command of space. Space has, in any useful meaning of the term, already been militarized.

I would also say that space is increasingly the backbone of the civilian economy. It offers connectivity and enables

instant communication, as we've certainly discovered over the past few months. That enables productivity, enables supply chain diversification, and enables people to talk with one another and send bundles of information back and forth around the world. And that's really at the core of the modern global economy, even now in the case of certain trade wars.

It's against that backdrop that we must consider how the U.S. government organized its previous structures for dealing with space. The Department of Defense has had several different organizations that have been committed to the management of space affairs. There was Space Command, which was dismantled in the early 2000s. We have more recently had Space Command again within the Air Force. We've also had the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command. And we've had the Naval Network Warfare Command.

If you go back further, you find a lot of alphabet soup acronyms for various agencies that do space. So, it's not as if the U.S. Space Force is bringing us into space or is the first time that the military has encountered space. So, what does the Space Force constitute now, or what do we envision it constituting within the next couple of years?

The Space Force is an independent service in the U.S. military. And this places it alongside the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Marine Corps.

It shares a bit of structural similarity to the Marine Corps. Just as the Marine Corps is part of the Department of the Navy, the Space Force is part of the Department of the Air Force. So, unlike the Army, the Navy, or the Air Force, it does not have its own secretary. It's an independent service that does not have its own independent civilian department. The Space Force is projected in the near future to have 16,000 personnel, mostly from the Air Force and most of those transferred from Air Force Space Command.

But there are also folks from other services moving into the Space Force. Broadly, the responsibilities of the Space Force are supposed to be independent space operations, which can cover a whole bevy of different things that an organization can do. But people are thinking about it in terms of defensive and offensive operations, particularly in space and against other space assets. The management of the space commons is a common phrase you hear. In the same way that the Navy ensures safe access to the maritime commons, the Space Force ensures that the space commons is usable, not just for the U.S. government but also for private organizations, private firms, and U.S. allies.

So, what are the arguments for the creation of a new independent service? There are a few. Most importantly, other services have other priorities. It is important to enable the development of professional pathways in space, which is to say, to create incentives for the development of human capital around space expertise, to create space officers—not people who have to rely on being able to fly a jet fighter or a bomber but people who can dedicate their

entire careers to developing space professional expertise, to enable development of strategic space theory. Not to belabor the point, but to create a space in which people can think about space in the same way that the Air Corps Tactical School created a space for people to think about air warfare.

There's also the important idea of unifying space acquisition so that you have one place rather than four different services. By unifying that within a single service, we can then apply all that theoretical expertise to the development of acquisitions.

So, what about some of the counterarguments? One is that the Space Force is likely to result in a reduction of jointness. The argument goes that the creation of an independent organization with its own ways of thinking is likely to detract from the ability of that organization to provide services to the rest of the Department of Defense—that you're just creating an extra layer of bureaucracy, which is an obstacle whenever military organizations have to speak with one another. But it's particularly important with space because all the other military organizations depend acutely on space for their day-to-day activities. So that's a point to consider carefully.

We can expect there to be bureaucratic politics. When we created the Air Force, it resulted in bitter infighting between the Air Force and its sister services. And some of that infighting continues today. We also see that infighting in other countries that don't have unified armed forces.

When it was created, the Air Force had several different antecedents that had already developed their own culture. The point I want to make here is that the cultural, organizational, and experiential gulf between the Air Force in 1947 and the Space Force in 2020 is immense and is difficult to overstate. The U.S. Air Force in 1947 was huge, had fought a war, and had a strong organizational culture. It had a strong and robust set of theories and doctrines about how air warfare was supposed

to be conducted. It knew where it had been, and it knew where it was going.

The Space Force in a sense has some of these things but not nearly to the same extent as the Air Force had. So, the comparison here suggests that, in fact, the Space Force is much more novel in 2020 than the Air Force was in 1947.

Unfortunately, in my view, we haven't re-



ROBERT FARLEY

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ally worked out yet exactly what the Space Force is going to do in terms of furthering the mission that it has already been tasked with. We are running the risk of allowing parochial bureaucratic interests to reduce the effectiveness of the entire force. Even though there are strong arguments for why this was a course worth pursuing, I think we have created a new service in a way and with a foundation that, to me, looks particularly risky. It probably should have been more carefully considered than it was.

**BRIAN WEEDEN:** I, too, was very much a skeptic on the creation of the Space Force early on. I participated in several debates with people that were proponents back in 2017, 2018, when all this was going on. Even though I was skeptical, I did agree with the proponents of the Space Force on the shortcomings of the existing system. As Rob mentioned, there are important goals like fixing acquisitions, doing a better job developing a truly professional space cadre that was not built around pilot culture, and developing a space doctrine. I think there was general agreement among all of us that the existing culture and bureaucratic setup within the Air Force was preventing us from addressing those challenges. My opposition to the Space Force was that it wasn't clear to me how creating a new service was going to address those core problems.

Now, that said, the best argument for creating the Space Force was that creating a new organizational structure and a new culture was necessary to fix those underlying problems. In other words, the existing structure was preventing those problems from being addressed. So, we had to break away and create a new structure with a new culture so that then we could fix the problems.

There is some merit to that. What that does mean, though, is that this is a long-term process. That's one of the first challenges we have: there are people out there taking political credit for the Space Force and saying basically that things are done, mission accomplished. They say we've won now that we've created the Space Force, when really, creating the Space Force is the very first step in what's going to be a long multiyear, probably multidecade, effort to try to address some of these challenges.

The space community has been debating whether there should be a separate service or entity for space since the Rumsfeld Commission report came out in January 2001. So, this has been a long-running debate. But it also came to a culmination

very quickly. If you think back to 2016 and 2017, Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL) started pushing this issue on the Hill. At the time he was calling for a Space Corps, and he had bipartisan support for that in the House, but it ran into some challenges in the Senate, which is not unusual. Then what happened is that President Trump got involved and essentially forced the politics on this to resolve. Using his power, and doing some political horse-trading with Speaker Nancy Pelosi, he forced through the creation of the Space Force. I think that short-circuited some of the discussion and debate about how to do this in the best way that might've helped things.

To Rob's point, I think the bureaucratic infighting is definitely a big, big challenge that's going to be coming. For those of you who saw the Space Force TV show on Netflix, I think that was one of the most accurate parts. They show a budget hearing where they had a back-and-forth with the different services fighting with each other about the budget. We're going to see that coming in the fiscal year 2022 budget discussions. We're already hearing rumors that that is going to be a budgetary bloodbath. After years of Republicans pushing for big increases in defense spending, Democrats are probably going to be a lot less eager to continue that growth, and that will lead to budgetary infighting.

Aside from that, it's way too early to tell whether the Space Force has actually been a good thing and addressed all of these challenges. I think they've made some progress in a few areas. There are some things we're seeing, but we're still a long way from being able to tell for sure.

On the things they've gotten right, I think, is that the planning guidance from General John W. Raymond, the first head of the Space Force, was very good in terms of outlining how to build a truly digital service and to take a new approach to military organization and personnel systems.

That's really important. It's necessary because, for the first time, we have a military service that is not people heavy. Look at the Army, the Navy, and even the Air Force: you need a lot of people to support the things that they're doing. Space is very, very different. It's all robots, and the robots are largely controlled by a handful of computers.

In terms of the normal military hierar-



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chy for personnel, that has to be very different. They're trying to come up with a new culture and new terminology, such as deltas, garrisons, and guardians, that are sort of shockingly new for us. For people like me that grew up in the Air Force Space Command, we're used to squadrons, bases, and airmen, but I think changing that is an important part of the transition.

In terms of things that I think they need to do a better job of, one is toning back the warfighting rhetoric. I understand why they're talking about warfighting. That's important. The problem is most people in

the public don't understand what a warfighting culture means. They assume the Space Force wants to go off and kill people and blow up cities, which is what other warfighters do. The reality is they run GPS and weather satellites, and they keep satellites from crashing into each other. I think the single-minded focus in rhetoric on war, war, war reinforces the wrong perceptions about what the Space Force is doing, and it creates both domestic policy problems and diplomatic problems.

Then there are acquisitions. That is the single hardest problem to solve, because you have not only the bureaucracy with the other services but also the bureaucracy within the Air Force. You have institutions and constituencies within Congress to deal with. There are challenges with the U.S. Space Force as a force provider, dealing with the combatant commanders, and dealing with the other services. It's complicated, and it's not clear how much centralizing space acquisitions is going to help.

Another big issue is deterrence. The message from senior leadership has been that the main goal is to deter attacks on U.S. satellites, but there's been very little discussion of how to do that. We have not really had a national conversation on what is space deterrence, what is the best way to do that, like we have for other domains.

And then finally, I'll say that the area that is the biggest challenge so far is the links between the Space Force and sort of what I'll call science fiction. You've seen some advertisements from the Space Force involving potentially people and boots on the moon, people on Mars, and that sort of stuff. That is not going to happen anytime in the next several decades. That is not what's happening now. There's no Space Force astronaut corps, even if some NASA astronauts previously serving in the Air Force are symbolically transferred to the Space Force.

Part of the needed message control is to  
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*A horrific pandemic reveals truths about human action*

## The Economics of COVID-19

The ongoing pandemic has radically reshaped everyday activity for millions of Americans. As deaths in the United States near half a million, we continue to grapple with the reality of the worst mass casualty event in over a century, surpassing even both world wars. As governments, businesses, and individuals scrambled to react to a world turned upside down, economic chaos ensued.

But even in the most trying times, the insights of economics offer an important set of tools for understanding people and their actions. That's what Ryan Bourne, R. Evan Scharf Chair for the Public Understanding of Economics at Cato, sets out to explain in his new book *Economics in One Virus: An Introduction to Economic Reasoning through COVID-19*.

As he explains, "By fundamentally changing the calculations about what we wanted and were able to do, [the pandemic] exposed the sheer scale of choices we usually make unthinkingly." Simple, mundane tasks became fraught with new risks and new tradeoffs. Governments, too, were faced with unprecedented choices as they considered radical new policy responses.

While the science of medicine and epidemiology shaped many of these decisions, Bourne explains how they were fundamentally economic. "For at its most basic, economics is about choices. It is about weighing different options or alternatives in the face of constraints."

Across 16 chapters and in a straightfor-

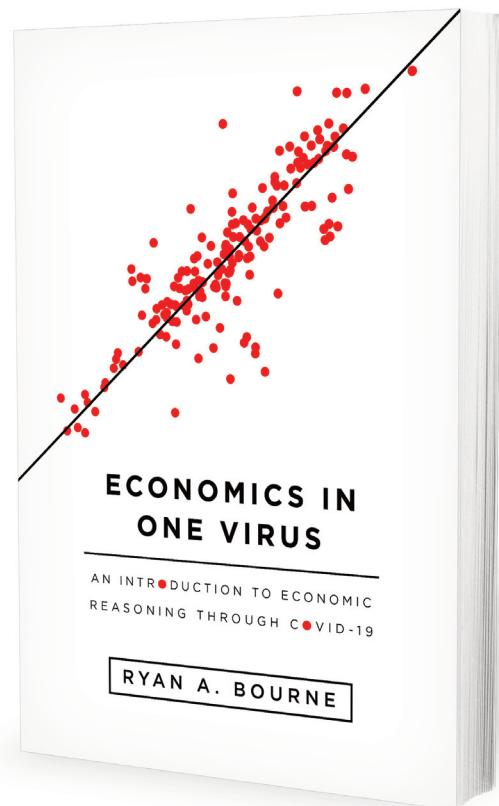
ward and accessible manner, Bourne answers a series of questions: "When is a lockdown cure worse than the disease?" provides a window into cost-benefit analysis. "What good is a pandemic plan with so many unknowns?" is used to explain uncertainty and the knowledge problem. "Why was there no hand sanitizer in my pharmacy for months?" is the question that launches an exploration of the price system.

While individual behavior has been shaped by economic incentives, the actions—and failures—of government also have economic explanations. In the chapter "Why did airlines get a special bailout but not my industry?", Bourne explains the basics of public choice economics: how the structures of government often incentivize politicians and policymakers to do the wrong thing for what seems to them like rational reasons.

Throughout *Economics in One Virus*, Bourne uses the deadly serious circumstances of the past year to highlight principles of economics that often operate in the background, guiding our decisions with little conscious action. But there is no escaping economics, and its principles will continue to shape our world long after the pandemic has passed. For that reason, it's crucial for citizens and policymakers alike to have a better under-

**"A smart, wide-ranging, and admirably clear introduction to the power of economics."**

— TIM HARFORD  
"THE UNDERCOVER ECONOMIST"



standing of what works, what doesn't, and how the constraints of economics cannot be casually discarded without serious consequence. ■

**ECONOMICS IN ONE VIRUS WILL BE RELEASED IN APRIL AND WILL BE AVAILABLE FROM ONLINE AND RETAIL BOOKSELLERS.**

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tell the public what is actually happening. But also, we're starting to see some of the Space Force people and perhaps leadership get a bit distracted from the core challenges like GPS jamming and how do we better integrate support space services into terres-

trial combat and warfighting operations. They're getting distracted by things like the moon, which is just silly. Leave that to NASA. Manned spaceflight is well outside the bounds the Space Force needs to focus on at the moment.

The arguments for creating the Space

Force weren't crazy, and it might still work out. But between politics that short-circuited much of the discussion, and some of the early signs about which way the service is developing, I don't think we can say yet that it was the right decision at the right time. ■