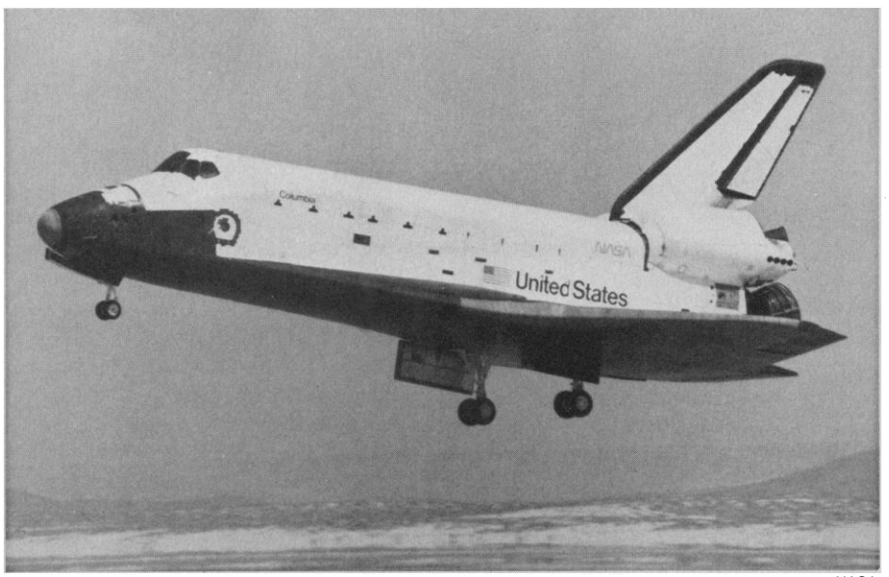
Military Plans for Shuttle Stir Concern

Some arms controllers are alarmed by the space shuttle's military orientation

As the space shuttle Columbia swooped over the California desert toward a graceful touchdown, one of its more enthusiastic viewers was Lieutenant General Richard Henry, commander of the Air Force Space Division. Beside him were about a dozen top Air Force brass, including one from the recently formed office of space plans and policy at the Pentagon. In a decision that some considered symbolically important, President Reagan sent Air Force Secretary Verne Orr to be his representative at the landing.



NASA

The space shuttle Columbia approaches a perfect landing

Officials in the Soviet Union have charged that the space shuttle will be controlled by these men for military purposes and will not have the commercial and scientific uses that many were led to expect. Far from attacking this as propaganda, many U.S. officials are now admitting that the military has come to play the dominant role in a program funded almost entirely through the civilian budget of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). This burst of candor comes at time when the potential of the shuttle—on the heels of a spectacular first mission—appears quite great.

As such, the shuttle's recent performance is likely to renew a debate between supporters of its military role and members of the scientific community, some of whom feel they were led down a garden path.

Many in the arms control community are distressed by the exotic ideas for weapons in space coming from Pentagon planners flushed with enthusiasm for the shuttle's "flexibility," as the planners repeatedly put it. "What I object to, I guess, is riding on the back of something which in the end may make everybody less safe—by heating up a military confrontation in the space atmosphere where, in fact, we should be playing down the military aspects and playing up the civilian," said Bernard Feld, a physics professor at MIT and the editor of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, in a recent appearance on the *MacNeil-Lehrer Report*.

NASA officials, at least, have no regrets over redesigning the shuttle to accommodate military payloads or paying for the construction of two shuttle orbiters (out of four) intended for predominantly military use. On the eve of the first launch, John Yardley, NASA's director of space transportation, remarked frankly that "we did need some money. We did need the support of the Department of Defense and the Administration to get the money. As to what would have happened if they hadn't been interested, that would be conjecture." Congressional sources say that without DOD support, the program would have been sharply curtailed when technical troubles first arose.

Perhaps the most candid statement about the shuttle's military use came last year from then Air Force Secretary Hans Mark, who told an aeronautics conference that "NASA is in fact a minor user and not the driver [of the shuttle]. That's something the NASA folks don't like to hear, but it is true." Robert Jastrow, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, says that he thinks no one was deceived about the shuttle's military orientation "except for some self-deception on the part of my scientific colleagues." He has harsh words for those who desire primarily scientific use: "I think it's the product of an unrealistic attitude which tends to be generated among people who live in a creative way that, you know, the taxpayers' money is there for them to spend for their intellectual interest." Others at NASA are less comfortable with the new military partnership, which lends a more furtive atmosphere to its missions. During the initial flight, for example, NASA relied on military telescopes to make certain that the shuttle's protective tiles were intact. Ground controllers were forced to deflect questions about the surveillance because of military secrecy.

NASA is quick to point out that defense missions compose only 30 percent of those listed for the next few years, with commercial and scientific projects making up the balance. Most of the missions fulfill obvious Pentagon functions, including weather prediction, surveillance, navigation, and communications. One goal is to construct satellites that can convey high-resolution radar images directly to the ground instead of committing the images to film; such satellites could be serviced in space and remain aloft for long periods. Another is to use the shuttle itself for surveillance of the ground during a regional crisis. The Air Force is building special launch facilities at Vandenburg, California, to handle satellites intended for strategically important polar orbits. It is also developing a special rocket to boost its satellites into geosynchronous orbits after deployment by the shuttle. (Air Force officials are hard-pressed to say which of these functions cannot be accomplished through old-fashioned ground launches. Suppos-

0036-8075/81/0501-0520$00.50/0

edly, the shuttle's payload bay will accommodate satellites broader than those that will fit atop conventional rockets, but new rockets might just as well be built and some in the Air Force are advocating this anyway. Because rapid advances in surveillance and communications require that new satellites be launched frequently, the advantages of in-orbit servicing may be slim.)

Air Force officials stress that even the orbiters scheduled to fly out of Vandenburg will conduct some civilian missions, and that they will primarily be under NASA's control. But some of them privately share the desire of former Secretary Mark to obtain independent control of the orbiters. Mark had expressed concern that NASA would object to some of the military missions, although he never said what these missions might be.

One exotic mission would be the construction and deployment of a manned orbiting military base. Another is the highly publicized concept of laser battle stations that could be used to attack missiles or planes from either low-earth or geosynchronous orbit. Former Secretary of Defense Harold Brown told *MacNeil-Lehrer* that "there is in my judgment no doubt that you can send up spacecraft . . . with laser beams to defend themselves, that's the easiest of all; to defend other satellites, considerably harder but probably feasible; or even to, in principle, destroy ballistic missiles—conceivable, but in my judgment not practical . . . at least not for decades and not without costs running into the $100 billion range." Brown says he agrees with those in the arms control community who believe it would be a mistake to incite a competition with the Soviets over lasers in space. But a contingent of senators, led by Malcolm Wallop (R–Wyo.), strongly supports such weapons and has pressured the Reagan Administration into expanding the Pentagon's laser weapons research.

Any organized plan to launch such weapons would run into a number of diplomatic barriers. The U.S.-Soviet treaty on antiballistic missile systems requires that both nations discuss limitations on any unconventional, newly invented technology. Discussions are reportedly already under way on a ban of space-based antisatellite weapons. A United Nations resolution also demands that space be restricted to peaceful uses, although the laser weapons advocates want to avoid the requirement by calling the laser weapons purely defensive in nature, and therefore peaceful.

Those who are concerned about the militarization of space take comfort in the fact that the Pentagon's goals—beyond the obvious immediate ones involving satellites or reconnaissance—are as yet ill-defined. An Air Force spokesman says, "We will define a military role for man in space during the next 5 to 10 years." Considerable debate should ensue, whatever the decision is.

—R. JEFFREY SMITH

Afghanistan: The Politics of a Tragicomedy

Anthropologist Louis Dupree believes both the Afghan Marxists and the Russians have failed to understand the cultural norms of Afghan society

Afghanistan has largely dropped from the headlines since the invasion by Soviet troops in Christmas 1979. Yet the country remains as much as ever in turmoil, with the provinces in revolt against the alien occupier and a constant stream of refugees leaving their war-torn villages for sanctuary in Pakistan.

One of those refugees, in a sense, is Louis Dupree, an American anthropologist who through his work in Afghanistan over the past 30 years has acquired an unrivaled knowledge of its political affairs. On a recent visit to Washington to lobby for the sending of American arms to the Afghan resistance fighters, Dupree talked about the latest vicissitudes in the country's turbulent political history.

A member of the American Universities Field Staff and of the University of Pennsylvania, Dupree is the author of *Afghanistan* (Princeton, 1973), a cultural and political history of the country. Unlike some scholars, who choose to cultivate no larger an area than they can keep exclusive, Dupree's range of interest in Afghanistan extends from its Neolithic archeology to its contemporary politics. In the latter domain, his expertise is based on a circle of acquaintances that extends to all parts of Afghan society. His house in Kabul was something of a floating international seminar, a unique meeting place for Afghans and foreigners, Russians and Westerners, visitors and residents.*

Dupree sees the present debacle in Afghanistan as the product of general miscalculation. The Russians, he believes, "planned a Dominican Republic–style invasion, after which they could pull out. But now they are stuck." As for the Afghan leadership, its politics may have been Marxist, but more in the style of Groucho than Karl. Almost entirely Western-educated, but during the period of the Cold War, the Afghan leaders attempted to play off the Russians and Americans in traditional fashion, and were bewildered when the Americans, in a spasm of post-Vietnam guilt, just withdrew from the ball game. The Afghans' other miscalculation was that they could sprinkle their essentially nationalist program with Marxist slogans without confusing anyone. Like the American embassy, the population, familiar with Soviet propaganda, assumed that the Kabul government must be either pro-Soviet or under Soviet domination. This was the signal that started the countrywide re-

> Afghan Marxism—more Groucho than Karl.

*Traveling through Afghanistan as a student in the 1960's, this writer called on Dupree and was whisked off on the activity of the day, a press conference held by the Minister of Justice on the proceedings of the newly elected parliament. Clad in jeans and a somewhat insalubrious shirt, I did not very strongly resemble a member of the working press, to whom the meeting was restricted. Dupree, whose practice in uncertain situations is to grasp the initiative, marched straight up to the minister and (without any prior warning to me) introduced his disheveled young companion as "the correspondent of the London *Times*." Fortunately the Minister of Justice was too courteous to express his skepticism, and the *Times*'s real correspondent in Kabul did not show up that day.

0036-8075/81/0501-0521$00.75/0