

BOOK REVIEW

## Aaron Bateman, *Weapons in Space: Technology, Politics, and the Rise and Fall of the Strategic Defense Initiative*

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Cold War plans to use Earth orbit for explicit military purposes – like the US Air Force’s discussed Manned Orbiting Laboratory – regularly came under extreme public scrutiny in the United States and abroad. Perhaps none of these programmes was derided as much as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). As its ‘Star Wars’ nickname suggests, the programme is generally understood to have been hastily planned, technologically unworkable and politically dangerous. At the time and in subsequent historical studies, the initiative has been either dismissed outright or criticized for its rhetoric, which seemingly both escalated Cold War tensions and amplified fractures between the United States and its European allies.

Aaron Bateman’s *Weapons in Space* offers a correction to these assumptions. Bateman studies SDI from a US policy perspective, taking seriously SDI architects’ aims, as well as their fears for what might happen should the United States not pursue such a policy. Overall, Bateman argues against dismissing SDI outright. Tracing the lineage of policies that led to SDI, Bateman first shows how it was a crucial piece of Reagan-era thinking and therefore should be studied as part of wider US international aims. Second, Bateman shows that even if the initiative was never enacted in the ways initially imagined, its existence did create real-world consequences, some of which are still being grappled with today.

*Weapons in Space* makes clear that SDI was never just one programme. It was in fact an umbrella organization encompassing several different projects, including space-based surveillance, anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) and missile defence. Various actors attributed contradictory meanings to SDI across the years, perhaps contributing to the broader public confusion about it. SDI was, at times, a way to spare the United States from a nuclear attack, a way to share technologies and thereby cooperate with the Soviet Union, a way to innovate domestic US technological capabilities, and a bargaining chip for any future superpower arms negotiations.

Bateman shows how SDI plans were firmly rooted in long-held US foreign-policy aims. The US and Soviet space programmes had always used space flight for political advantage. This advantage included the soft-power boons that accompanied human space flight victories. It also included the actual defence capabilities that stemmed from satellites’ ability to collect and send information. These passive systems remained the focus for the first decades of the space age, but, by the end of the 1970s, the United States was looking

for ways to shift these systems into more active ones. ASATs gained greater consideration in these years, paving the way for the wider, more active space military endeavours at the heart of SDI.

This thinking about new ways to use low Earth orbit for military advantage coincided with the end of détente and the start of the Reagan administration. This timing is crucial for Bateman – he argues that Reagan-era policies broke with earlier commitments to superpower cooperation and arms limitations, instead seeking to achieve outright military superiority over the Soviet Union. Such superiority, he argues, included both Earth- and space-based components. ASATs, a space station and a range of private commercial space activities were all part of this broader policy, and SDI became the overarching organization to oversee them. With this context in mind, SDI looks less like a rushed and ultimately unworkable plan and more like one part of a much wider outlook from the administration.

Bateman also shows that SDI, although limited in its technological achievements, did impact other policy decisions. The Reagan administration, for instance, declined to entertain any international agreements regarding arms control in Earth orbit, since policy makers worried that any arms limitation might hamper the aims of SDI and squander the US advantage in the arena. Bateman argues that it is through this reticence to discuss arms limitations in space that the legacy of SDI continues today, shown most palpably through the chaos caused by debris from ASAT tests on existing satellites.

Bateman's call to take SDI seriously as an initiative will likely open up research into additional facets of the programme. The author focuses primarily on archival collections from presidential libraries, along with the CIA, NRO and NSA. These collections are a reasonable choice given the policy focus of the book. Future research might want to look at the other groups who had an interest in pursuing or rejecting SDI, including Congress, contractors and industry, scientists and the academy, anti-war protesters, and the US public. Furthermore, although *Weapons in Space* includes US discussions with Western European allies, future researchers might also look into European archival collections, especially in the Bundesarchiv in Germany and Archives nationales in France, to investigate how SDI shaped US cooperation with major allies in Western Europe. Finally, now that Bateman has shown that SDI cannot be dismissed out of hand, further research beyond policy might also illuminate the financial, technological and political reasons why it never came to fruition.

*Weapons in Space* sits at the intersection of the history of US policy and the history of technology and therefore will likely be of interest to readers who want to learn more about US Cold War defence policy and those who want to learn more about space technologies, especially after the end of the Moon race. Overall, it offers a crucial reminder that space flight and space technologies were never separate from Cold War policies.