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SCIENCE AND STRENGTH: THE HISTORY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CIVIL AND
MILITARY SPACE ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Abstract

In 1958 the United States National Aeronautics and Space Act was passed by Congress, creating the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to conduct the nation's civil space program while simultaneously granting authority to the Department of Defense for space activities relating to defense and security. Since, the relationship between military, civil, and private space activities in the United States has remained intertwined.

Spread over nine centers, NASA enjoys a well-deserved reputation for scientific excellence and achievements in space exploration. The public tends to not associate NASA with national security or defense issues. However, the U.S. military – particularly the Air Force – cooperates with NASA to a great extent. Some contend there are more opportunities for NASA to participate in national security: from placing greater weight on international cooperation, to combining missions with the military, to using technological advancements to support security. Others reject the relationship between exploration and defense outright. In truth, whether NASA – or a private space company – wants to be involved in national security or not, national security leaders are interested in them. Examining the history between civil and military space operators can shed light on how this complex debate unfolds in the public and within the U.S. government.

As such, this paper doesn't seek to answer the question of how much civil and military overlap should occur, but rather takes an objective look at the history of the relationship, exploring the long term relationship between civil and military space organizations in the United States. The includes review of the U.S. Air Force space missions, U.S. Space Command and other relevant joint commands, the newly formed U.S. Space Force service, NASA, the U.S. Space Council, the commercial crew partnership program, diplomatic efforts in the U.S. State Department and more.

This historical review of U.S. space history, focused solely on the relationship between defense and civil efforts, examines and showcases the relationship between these organizations to create understanding of the long-standing, nuanced, and sometimes tense connection between space science and military power in the United States.