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Exploration, Not Exploitation:

Who's the Enemy?

In the blockbuster movie "Independence Day," people all over the Earth band together in common purpose: to blow away the evil alien enemy.

Throughout the Cold War, such extraterrestrial "bad guys" clearly were stand-ins for the Communist "bad guys." But what about now? What do these alien enemies represent today?

In the current process of reconstructing the U.S. civil space program to meet post-Cold War needs and realities, it is not useful for space policy makers and advocates to hang on to the outdated idea of an "enemy" that needs to be destroyed. Nonetheless, die-hard "space warriors" continue to promote dangerous concepts of conquest and exploitation in mapping out our future in space.

In exploring the unknown, vigilance is necessary. But repeating past mistakes is not. Talk of mining the moon and staking claims on asteroids conjures thoughts of how the developed world has exploited the resources of developing countries. Such images are exactly what turn off potential constituents who now believe the space program is a waste of money....

This "warrior syndrome" is all too common in the space community. One warrior talks of inevitable battle in space ("A.F. Chief Calls War in Space Inevitable," SN August 12-18). A U.S. Space Command officer bandies about terms such as "superiority...combatants...contest...warriors...exploitation...protection, reaction, and destruction..." in addressing our future in space ("A Call to Space Warriors," Space News, June 24-30).

Yet other space warriors promote a new rationale for completing projects that were started for ballistic missile defense -- "Kill the Commies!" is no longer a sensible battle cry, so now the warriors clamor "Kill the asteroids!"

One military space official has put forth the argument that the public did not rally behind President Bush's Space Exploration Initiative because it did not appeal strongly enough to people's fear and greed.

Fanning the flames of fear -- "The asteroids are coming! The asteroids are coming!" -- might generate some demand for an asteroid-defense system. Feeding people's greed -- "You too can own a piece of the Moon! Buy now, quantities limited!" -- no doubt will compel some profiteers to line up fast for claims on extraterrestrial resources.

But this direction is not the best one to take in space. The American people did not, will not, get excited about a space exploration initiative designed to conquer and exploit, to beat the solar system into submission and pave the way toward crass commercialism in space.

"Great indeed is Fear," wrote American philosopher William James, "but it is not, as our military enthusiasts believe and try to make us believe, the only stimulus for awakening the higher ranges of men's [sic] spiritual energy....." Indeed, war against some evil "alien" enemy is not the only, let alone the best, way to hold a society together. Large-scale, peaceful, collective endeavors -- some "moral equivalent of war" -- could push humans to collaborate in great achievements.

Exploration for the sake of conquest and exploitation is not a sound foundation for our future in space. The Antarctic Treaty, providing for cooperative exploration and prohibiting claims of ownership or the exploitation of resources, offers a more viable model.

If the space community chooses to feed people's curiosity, then people will be curious. Witness public response to the recent announcement of possible evidence for life on Mars. And consider public interest in the possibility of extrasolar planets, the search for evidence of life beyond our solar system, the origin and fate of the universe. These questions alone are enough to propel the nation's space program well into the 21st century.

Warriors, conquerors, exploiters, and colonizers should turn in their space-explorer badges. They should have no place in shaping the future of space exploration. What the space community needs right now is not more "military enthusiasts" but a few good social theorists and moral philosophers to guide the design of a meaningful 21st century space exploration program.

Space exploration can be a fruitful pathway to power and freedom -- qualities everyone values. Some seek power by domination, freedom by abandonment. More constructively, space exploration offers the power to escape Earth's gravity and the freedom of flight, the power to see our world and ourselves in new ways and freedom from old worn-out paradigms, the power to do things that no one has ever done or even imagined and the freedom not to repeat past mistakes.

Today space exploration is, as policy makers say, about global leadership, economic competitiveness, scientific excellence, and technological progress. But more fundamentally, it is also about evolution, revelation, inspiration. It is about the gut feelings that kick in with the sight of a rocket launch or the birth of a star, the crystallization of a great new idea or the dawn of a deep insight. It is about possibilities....

Great things are happening in space exploration these days: over the past 10 years a successful string of missions to Mars has been launched; spacecraft have examined the moons of Saturn and Jupiter; probes are, or are about to be, on their way to Mercury, Venus and Pluto; asteroids and comets have been examined up close; and the Hubble

Space Telescope has yielded a constant stream of discoveries about the state of the universe.

Some call space "the final frontier." Perhaps it is more appropriate, and more encouraging, to think of space as the next frontier. How can we know there are no others?

Earth may never be rid of people who explore to seize and exploit. But we can choose to reward not the exploiters but those who explore to discover and learn. So what will it be? Exploration or exploitation? A million years from now, will humankind be like the locust-like monsters of "ID4," searching the galaxy for planets to pillage? Or will we be known throughout the Milky Way as great and wise explorers?

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