



Preventing an Arms Race in Outer Space

By James Carroll | May 12, 2008

AS WORLD WAR I broke out, Henry James identified an inexorable current that had been running below international events, leading to the "monstrous scene" of August "as its grand Niagara." Below the glassy upriver surface, the swift tide had been driven by habits of mind, arms merchant greed, imperial hubris, and a politics that was wholly inadequate. At the deadly cascade, nations tumbled into the most violent century in history. Writer Jonathan Schell cites the Niagara metaphor to define the still running momentum of war.

But as James wrote, humans stood on another threshold. Wars had always been fought on land and sea, but then new technologies of flight carried combat into the realm above. Airborne weapons transformed killing. Indeed, air force was the invention that made 20th century warfare catastrophic. In looking back on that development, is it only naïve to ask if governments could have agreed to ban weapons in the air? What if the dropping of bombs from the newfangled aeroplane had been outlawed? The mind reels to think of it.

A century later, the human race stands at an equivalent threshold, and a version of that exact question is indeed being asked. Can weapons be banned from outer space? Or will the Niagara current of defense contractor greed, imperial hubris, and inadequate politics carry the destructiveness of war into the "fourth battlefield" of the very cosmos? That is the question that has been asked at the United Nations Conference on Disarmament in Geneva for the last six years. But not by Washington. How many Americans know that the nation refusing to discuss a treaty aimed at preventing an arms race in outer space is their own? Indeed, the United States, in various Pentagon documents published during the Bush administration, is explicit in aiming to put weapons in space - lasers, directed energy weapons, kinetic kill vehicles. The US Space Command, in its "Vision for 2020," plans for "counterspace operations." The already deployed missile defense system is a first step toward an anti-satellite capability, giving the Pentagon control of the "high frontier."

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences recently published "Russian and Chinese Responses to US Military Plans in Space," a stark look at where the American project is taking the world. The academy was instrumental half a century ago in creating the arms control regime that enabled the Cold War to end nonviolently. Now it warns that "US space weaponization plans would have potentially disastrous effects on international security and the peaceful uses of space." Russia and China have insisted in Geneva that a treaty banning such weapons is urgently needed. Failing that, neither nation sees a choice but to respond - Russia by extending its aging ballistic missile forces, and China by readying a space weapons program of its own. Last week, for the first time since the Soviet era, missiles were paraded through Red Square. Last year, China fired the warning shot of a first anti-satellite missile test.

And how is the crucial question of weapons in outer space being considered in America? As the quadrennial political conversation of the presidential primaries was moving into gear last February, the Pentagon announced its intention to send a missile into space to shoot down a "wayward satellite," supposedly to protect Earth from its unspent fuel. Many observers - certainly including Chinese and Russians - questioned whether this was not, in fact, a step toward anti-satellite weaponry? If Henry James were alive, wouldn't he have recognized an upshift in the current toward Niagara? Yet neither the presidential candidates, nor the pundits and moderators who yap at them, saw in this event anything to discuss. The missile was fired, the satellite destroyed. No big issue. The world-historic decision about carrying warfare across the last threshold into outer space is being left to defense contractors, military commanders, and their wholly owned subsidiary on Capitol Hill. Not since August 1914 has politics seemed so irrelevant.

Humans who did not think to ban weapons from the air a century ago know better when it comes to outer space. Yet what are we doing? And if the deadly current is still hidden, what is that low rumble that can be heard, rolling toward us from down the river? ■