THE NEW HIGH GROUND: STRATEGIES AND WEAPONS OF SPACE-AGE WAR
by Thomas Karas
(Simon and Schuster; 224 pp.; $14.95)

Stefan Leader

Several years ago, at the height of Watergate, I had the privilege of listening to a speech by constitutional scholar Raoul Berger. Until then Berger had been anything but famous. But he had the great foresight—or good luck—to have published a book on impeachment at a time when the subject was on everyone's mind. As a result, Berger had a classic case of mixed feelings about Richard Nixon. Thanks to the president, Berger was playing to packed houses and was much in demand on the lecture circuit. On the other hand, Berger left little doubt in his opinion Nixon had committed impeachable offenses.

Tom Karas has good reason to regard President Reagan with similarly mixed feelings. The president's "star wars" speech of March 23, 1983, pushed the issue of weapons and warfare in space into the headlines and to the top of the national agenda. The final three chapters of Karas's book are about weapons in space and the last is a well-documented, thoughtful, and low-key analysis of the entire concept of beam-weapon defenses. And so President Reagan has given Karas and his excellent book a welcome publicity boost as journalists scramble around trying to interpret and assess the significance of the president's proposal to develop a satellite-borne, beam-weapon ABM system. On the other hand, Karas is more than a little dubious about the project and raises a host of timely questions about the technical feasibility, military value, cost, and political wisdom of the Reagan proposal.

The star wars speech has provoked some interesting reactions. A cynical friend of mine compared the speech to Reagan's "new federalism" proposal of 1982. In his view, both were empty rhetorical gestures and mainly designed to get headlines. But I think that assessment is wrong, at least for the latter speech, and Tom Karas's book helps us understand why. What makes the proposal in the star wars speech different is that, unlike the "new federalism," there is a small army of enthusiasts ready to pick up this particular ball and run with it. In fact, the president's speech was largely a product of their efforts. Karas does a good job of identifying some of these "space boosters" in the Air Force and elsewhere and exploring their views. One of the boosters is Lt. General Daniel Graham (ret.), author of The Heritage Foundation's space program called "High Frontier" and a new book by the same name. Graham advised Ronald Reagan during the 1980 campaign and is close to many administration officials.

As Karas makes very clear, the "space boosters" are already fighting bureaucratic battles within the Pentagon to get the resources necessary to advance their favored programs. But like the airpower enthusiasts of the 1930s, the space enthusiasts within the military view themselves as the unloved stepchildren of the Pentagon. Of course there is a fundamental lesson here. Very simply, the Pentagon is no monolith. If you want to hear about the flaws in the Air Force's weapons, ask the Navy or Army. Some of the most vehement critics of the MX, for example, wear Navy blue. Of course these differences don't always see the light of day, but they do often enough to make Pentagon bureaucratic politics one of the most interesting spectator sports in Washington.

Karas understands this well and finds within the Pentagon all the doubts and questions that need to be raised about beam weapons in space. For every Pentagon space weapon enthusiasm there is another Pentagon specialist thinking about the countermeasures necessary to neutralize the other side's space laser weapons. As Karas notes, the list of potential countermeasures for beam weapons includes reflective and ablative (heat dispersing) coatings, flares to "spoof" sensors as well as guidance systems and a host of other techniques. And if we can think of and develop these techniques, so can the Soviets.

One of the most troubling suggestions regarding laser weapons in space comes from Pentagon laser expert George Millburn, quoted by Karas. In congressional testimony Millburn acknowledges that in operating beam-weapon missile defenses we might have to relinquish human command and control and build a completely autonomous system. Decisions on whether, when, and what to fire at, in Millburn's view, might have to be made not by political leaders or even by the military but by the weapon system itself. In short, the demand for rapid reaction might require a completely robot-controlled system. Writing the computer algorithms (decision rules) for such a system would be a nightmare—a problem encountered with the Safeguard ABM in the early 1970s. And the political problems would make the technical ones pale in comparison. Imagine the Pentagon, with its record of computer-generated false alarms in the last few years, trying to persuade Congress to fund such a system! Karas reports Millburn's speculation without comment and does not tell us what sort of reaction it received from the congressional committee. In fact, the tone throughout Karas's book is cool and evenhanded, although in a final section he gives his doubts and questions free rein.

Karas deals at length with issues other than beam weapons. In his discussion of the ins and outs of government-contractor relationships, we find that the space shuttle has encountered cost overruns at least as serious as those for most major weapons systems, although this does not seem to have dampened the public's enthusiasm for it. Karas also explains the "c-cubed revolution," spy satellites, navigation and weather satellites, all known in the Pentagon as "force multipliers."

The New High Ground is compact, free of errors, well written, and low key—an excellent survey of U.S. military space activities. WV

AFGHANISTAN AND THE SOVIET UNION
by Henry S. Bradsher
(Duke University Press; vii + 324 pp.; $32.50/$12.75)

Arnold Zeitlin

For more than three-and-a-half years the Afghan mujahideen have provided an extraordinary if unwitting service to the world's balance of power by tying up in their inhospitable land a hundred thousand Soviet soldiers who might otherwise be up to mischief elsewhere. They will be at it for quite some time, concludes Henry S. Bradsher, who has reported from Moscow and Kabul as a correspondent for the Associated Press

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