**BOOKS**

**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 that 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 enthusiast 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 “spool” 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.
and the late Washington Star. "Hostility will remain inside Afghanistan for the indefinite future," he writes. "It is not the kind of country to settle down to acquiescent rule by foreign puppets." In reaching his conclusion, Bradsher has performed a service as worthy as the mujahideen's, if less taxing logistically. From a landscape that is every bit as barren and resistant to cultivation as the rocky soil of Afghanistan itself, he has eked out a remarkable collection of information about the events leading to and from the 1979 Soviet invasion.

Bradsher is occasionally too circumstantial. He cannot bring himself to identify the Russian-speaking United States ambassador in Kabul during the 1978 coup d'etat that turned Afghanistan from feudalism to Marxism, yet in the index one finds him named: Theodore L. Eliot, Jr., now dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and, more relevant to the Afghan linguistic scheme, a practiced Farsi speaker. Much of the information, in fact, is presented from a Western, mostly American perspective, some emanating from sources who decline to be identified for publication. Yet it is no fault of Bradsher's that there is little from the Afghan point of view except official documents. Afghans are not given to public soul-searching.

Bradsher places his findings before the reader in easily digestible form, building a firm frame of reference for events in Afghanistan while reaching into the past for background and during to project into the future to reinforce his explanation of what the Soviets are up to. He consoles neither side in the debate over the significance of the Soviet presence in that enigmatic land. Those who see the Soviet invasion in December, 1979, as part of the Russian grand lust for a warm-water port are told that a more likely motive "was the age old tendency for any powerful nation to seek the territorial limits of its power, to seek to fix a secure and stable frontier." Those who see the invasion as an offshoot of parochial Communist politics and no danger to world-wide security are told that this projection of Soviet power follows along in a tradition of meddling in Mongolia, Ethiopia, and South Yemen and that it was fueled in part by American weakness. Unnamed U.S. officials say the Carter administration's backing away from the initially tough position on the Soviet brigade was, more than any other single episode, the most important influence in the Soviet leadership's decision that the invasion was an acceptable risk in terms of international behavior." But Bradsher also points out that the toughness of the Carter reaction did surprise the Kremlin and that the president's undoing was the pressure of farmer and broker to sell grain—a bloc over which several presidents have stumbled.

The book is at its best in its portrayal of Hafizullah Amin, who in two decades rose from what passes in Afghanistan for a relatively cozy middle-class existence to the country's premier Communist. Bradsher passes along the intriguing speculation that Amin encountered Marxism while visiting Wisconsin. Somehow he returned from such experiences as studying at Columbia University and living for six weeks in a family in Hamden, Connecticut, to become the enigmatic central figure in Afghanistan's subjection to Soviet domination. With a ruthlessness and harshness that seem his most admirable qualities, Amin eliminated his major rival, Nor Mohammed Taraki, who was also a beneficiary of experience in the United States. He elbow'd aside for a time the chief Afghan token Communist, Babrak Karmal; he sneered at the Soviet leadership right inside the walls of the Kremlin; and he fell, finally, to the troops the Soviets blandly insist he had invited. Amin typifies the ambition, the pretension, the bewildered inadequacy and consequent resentment of so many overmatched leaders in politically immature countries.

Bradsher never fully examines the threat Afghanistan represented, yet this is the corollary of his thesis that the Soviet Union sought a "secure and stable frontier." He refers too briefly to the variegated ethnic makeup of the country. He himself quotes the Soviet official in charge of Soviet Communist party relations with the People's Democratic party of Afghanistan—the umbrella for the warring Marxist factions in the country—as having said before the invasion: "The Afghan state was on the verge of disintegration." It is a remark that reflects similar opinions expressed authoritatively in the United States before the invasion: The ethnic rivalries churning against a weakening central authority, a circumstance with roots far deeper than the domestic Communist takeover of April, 1978, eventually would have splintered a country that never had been a secure geographical unit. An irony of the Soviet invasion is that, for the time being, it has succeeded in keeping Afghanistan united.

For all his investigation's excellence and vastness of scope, Bradsher reports the use of chemical warfare in Afghanistan without mentioning the controversy surrounding such reports. He also glosses over the eventual significance of India in Afghanistan's future. He tantalizes us with a brief account of efforts by the Communist party of India, acting as an agent of the Soviet Party, to unite the Khall and Parchem wings of the People's Democratic party of Afghanistan. With the collapse of the shah, India achieved hegemony in South Asia and its immediate western perimeter. The prospect of Soviet troops in the Khyber Pass or, in the case of a collapse of a buffer Pakistan, on the banks of the Ravi, cannot cheer New Delhi, no matter what level of warmth it maintains with Moscow. India has always had a special commercial, military, and political relationship with Afghanistan, whatever government was sitting in New Delhi or Calcutta. Eventually, this relationship will assert itself, and we will be able to foresee more clearly the future of Afghanistan.

But that moment in history will take time to arrive. For now there are a hundred thousand armed Soviets occupied in, rather than occupying, Afghanistan, and there are too many people indifferent to the welfare of Afghanistan's people who want to keep it precisely that way. W Y