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Book Review: Considering Why We've Already Been There

Michael Wills

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, wills004@erau.edu

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REVIEW ARTICLE – SPACE CLASSICS

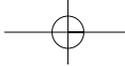
Considering Why We've Already Been There

MICHAEL S. WILLS

Walter A. McDougall, ...*the Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; first published in 1985).

One of the joys of moving from the rarefied air of annual budget drills and Pentagon staff summary sheets to the academic domain of professional military education is that one has the chance to read, and sometimes re-read, some profoundly thought-provoking material about all the work and activities one has been a part of for so many years. This reviewer has spent nearly all of his professional life building and operating national space systems; it's small wonder then that Walter McDougall's ...*The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age* has quickly become a favourite of his. Many justifiably kind words were said about it upon its first publication in 1985, and indeed when it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for History a year later. Nearly twenty years on, this book continues to show the real worth of its contribution to the study of space power and politics, as this reviewer's recent efforts to teach these subjects within an international military staff college environment have made plain to him.

Teaching to mid-career military officers from over 50 nations, one is constantly reminded of the all-too-human drive to have simple explanations for complex things; in particular, we all seem to want simple stories that explain the past in ways that let us make useful decisions about the present so as to make the future what we want or need it to be. Serving up what one Royal Navy Captain called 'the same old horse pills of history'¹ becomes even more of a challenge when most students look at the subject in question as something beyond their nation's grasp, outside their individual influence, and therefore not worthy of their attention or study. Space flight falls prey to this quest for the simple answer. It is horrendously expensive, requiring a national economy of American proportions to really make things happen, and an American-sized military, economic and political agenda to gain any profit from such a staggering investment. There is of course some interest if your nation is in a special position to gather a few space-based crumbs from the American banquet table of communications, intelligence and surveillance assets. Why, therefore, should



Kenya, or Greece, or Thailand, for example, care about post-Cold War adventurism beyond the stratosphere?

McDougall's work provides an excellent starting point from which to launch attacks on these misconceptions, and for many good reasons. Evidence-based argument should form the bedrock of such lesson material, and in this book a richly detailed, well-researched body of background material, replete with significant crosschecks and exhaustive endnotes, all well indexed, can be found. Though impressive and effective as a reference, however, the book's real strength, and the real key to its success in the marketplace of ideas, is in the sheer narrative grasp of the central themes that McDougall uses to frame his findings, conclusions and observations. The rise and fall of empires, the roots and uses of political power, the almost David and Goliath asymmetric struggles of the superpowers against each other and against the rest of the world's nations are compellingly presented in a fine piece of storytelling. This story of the space age's history and its impact upon the peoples of the world grabs the reader's attention and carries it through to McDougall's concluding thoughts on the search for a Guarantor of Decisions, the unquenchable human thirst for certainty, for destiny, and the things we can and will do to satisfy that thirst. These themes would also need to play a vital role in any teaching.

As the author mentions in his preface to the first edition, he had not started out with any interest in space programs per se; rather, it was the relationships that link technology, policy and empire that intrigued him. But his detailed researches into the how and the why of the conquest of space transform his own outlook and inform his perspective. Technology as both the enabler and expression of empire remains the central thread throughout this book, as he shows us the inevitable technocratic transformation of American society that the space race brought on. He shows us this through his patient exploration of the details, of which his examination of President Eisenhower's decisions regarding America's first satellite programs is but one example. Here, too, he makes good use of the 'Eisenhower revisionist' school, showing us a more factually informed portrait of Ike and his time in office. Then, the magic starts to occur: McDougall's narrative takes us from the detailed memo-by-memo, debate-by-debate analysis up to a more symbolic analysis. We look again at the symbols of that era, and are challenged to reconsider what those symbols really meant at the time, how those symbols interacted with each other. Cause and effect become, as a result, much more clearly defined as he challenges us to re-examine these larger meanings.

Did the Soviets 'win' the Space Race with the launch of *Sputnik*, and then Gagarin's ride into space? Or were they somehow maneuvered into leapfrogging ahead so as to set the precedents in a way that best served American interests? McDougall's text demonstrates its worth as detail-rich storytelling well on this issue, and on many other key events of the Space Race, as he lays the analytical foundation, frames up the commonly held viewpoints, and then suggests that unsolved mysteries lie beneath these surface perspectives. Having shown us how the dreams of space flight have become subservient to the need to reset the balance of power at the start of the atomic

era, McDougall offers a tantalizing glimpse at how this quest to close the 'missile gap' gives birth to the space age both as dream and reality.

He takes us through the process that led to the Rand Corporation's 1950 study, sometimes referred to as the 'birth certificate of American space policy' (p.108), within a concise and lucidly presented developmental context of international aviation and maritime law. The potential negative consequences to American space-based surveillance if an American space launch created the wrong legal precedent were clearly spelled out in this (then-) classified Rand report, circulated 'seven years to the day before *Sputnik I* (p.110) was launched. President Eisenhower was fully aware of all these considerations, and McDougall takes us through the deliberations of the Stewart Committee and the President over the choice of the Navy's Vanguard or the Army's Jupiter rocket as the launcher for the first US satellite. Here is where McDougall presents us with an unsolved mystery – did the president contrive to bait the Soviets into launching first, into declaring the spaceways in general and low earth orbit in particular as open to all?

But the examination of such questions, whether individually or in aggregate, is not at the heart of McDougall's story. His real central and compelling message concerns the transformation of American society at nearly every level as both the driver for and the product of the space age. As the Soviet Union and the United States fought a Cold War of mutual containment across and above the whole of the Earth, McDougall shows how each transformed the other's societies in fundamental and profound ways. The top-down, state-sponsored and -directed research and development agendas that Stalin initiated to build Katyusha rockets prior to the Second World War and his ICBM forces shortly thereafter became the hallmark of American industrial, economic, political and military power throughout the Cold War. The central myth of American heroism – the pioneer spirit that conquered the West one family at a time – was traded in for the astronaut as lone hero atop an organizational pyramid of hundreds of thousands of nameless, faceless aerospace workers. Educators across the US were deeply divided over many competing educational priorities. Would greater emphasis on engineering and science courses best meet the future needs of the nation, or would these needs be better served by striving for greater political and social relevance? While this debate raged on, the notion that centrally directed educational planning and curriculum content being matters for Washington bureaucrats to decide became a fixed piece of the American political landscape.

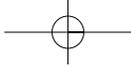
McDougall then adroitly sets these transformations within the broader international context, as he examines both the domestic political agendas and the 'benign hypocrisy' (p.360) of American space diplomacy via the framework of the end of the Apollo era, the demise of *Skylab*, and the meandering, almost purposeless direction for space station projects. He shows us that this was not restricted to the Soviet Union and the United States, as his examinations of space programs and aspirations in Europe, Japan, China and India attest.

In the preface to this second edition, McDougall draws an analogy to the process by which Europe's great powers of the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries first declined, then firmly grasped, the opportunities of colonial conquest and exploitation around the globe. Daniel Headrick's publication of *The Tools of Empire* in 1981² shifted the focus of historical analysis, McDougall points out, from the *motives* of colonial conquest and exploitation to the *means* by which empires could be founded and managed – and for what sort of profit. ...*The Heavens and the Earth* continues in this vein, and in doing so helps to illustrate another one of the central ironies of the Space Age. From a Headrick–McDougall perspective, the building of empires is a thoroughly pragmatic, unromantic enterprise, that only becomes desirable when it becomes *possible* to do so. The building of empires generates and gathers the power to influence, exploit, expand and coerce; along the way, the builder works to protect these gains in power, influence and opportunity, and only then worries about understanding and expressing his motivations in more laudable and defensible sentiments.

So we sail the seas, or soar into the heavens, when we can, and then figure out why to keep doing so. This is not to be confused with the *Field of Dreams* approach to project management. 'If we build it, they will come' is quite often the mantra quoted by advocates of many space programs and projects, from the Space Shuttle to Skylab, from reusable launch vehicles to the International Space Station. McDougall has thoroughly prepared the ground for subsequent researchers to examine why an agenda of stepwise refinement – the first surveillance satellites, Mercury, Gemini, Apollo before its acceleration – seems to have given way (in the public's perception at least) to an agenda of poorly described but lofty sounding ideals with indefensible (and apparently unachievable) program plans and budgets. The symbolic gloss has replaced the substance for so many of these programs; why, let alone what we should do about that, McDougall leaves to others to contemplate.

At this point, it is worthwhile drawing a stark comparison between McDougall's text and John Cannadine's *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*.³ Cannadine's thesis is focused on the *why* of empire building, but goes deep within the psyche of British society throughout its days as a great maritime power. He shows us Britain's single-minded focus on the hierarchical nature of human society: God at the top, then the King, then everyone else finds his place in a very rigidly prescribed order down to the lowest of the low. His countrymen, Cannadine argues, went on to build empires in their own image, replete with titles, honors and awards; if they didn't find such a hierarchy wherever they went, they would impose or create one. Taken by each turn, Britain's efforts to explore the world, establish trading patterns, create, manage and exploit their colonies were nothing more than hard-nosed pragmatic business and political decisions. In the aggregate, though, Cannadine shows us that these were part of a nearly subconscious quest to learn about one's self through projection of that self onto the world around; to validate (if not vindicate) one's own patterns of life by finding their analogues elsewhere; and if they do not exist elsewhere, then create them instead. Ultimately, he argues, Britain lost its empire not so much because of its failure to adapt to the new technologies and the changing times of the



twentieth century, as because of its failure to really understand *why* it wanted an empire in the first place.

Look back at both the roots and the conduct of this first period of the conquest of space, as McDougall has done for us, and one sees the confusion of high and lofty dreams crossed with the enduring principles of realpolitik. A jumble of programs, plans and policies are announced; some are put in motion while others are studied to death; not even the key participants seem to really share a common sense of purpose and vision. Some have been nothing more than hesitant attempts at what McDougall calls 'Voyages to Tsiolkovskia', the technocratic dreamworld 'where earth, then solar system, then galaxy are given over to the pious purveyors of power, where mankind's social imperfections are attacked and vanquished, one by one, until none remain' (p.435). But many have amounted to little more than day trips through modern-day Potemkin villages, as the harsh realities of balance of power politics seek to limit, constrain or overcome the new advantages of becoming a spacefaring nation.

What Walter McDougall has left us with, in the final analysis, is a compelling examination of the dawn of the space age. Its hopes and dreams are placed alongside the cold hard realities of the power politics that gave birth to it, that shaped it, and in large part have clouded its real impact upon humankind. He shows us too how multiple, possible futures could have their roots in this same soil; not by flights of fancy or speculation, but with a clear and cogent revelation of the breadth and depth of ideas that have shaped the space age thus far. How we should choose which of these alternative heavens to seek out, to build into, to conquer, he does not distract us with his own speculations; instead, he shows us the foundations that have already been laid. The rest, he leaves to us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is a Lt Col. in the US Air Force. The views expressed in this essay are those of the author alone, and do not represent the views or policies of the US Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

NOTES

1. An unnamed Naval Captain described the curriculum of the UK's new Joint Services Command and Staff College in this way during its opening ceremonies, as reported by Robert Fox, 'Combined College Launches Forces into a New Era', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 February 2001; perhaps he was referring to Group Captain Peter W. Gray, RAF, 'Why Study Military History?', in idem (ed.), *Military History into the 21st Century* (Camberley: Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, 2001), p.7.
2. Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).
3. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).