

2023

Dark Skies: Space Expansionism, Planetary Geopolitics, and the Ends of Humanity

Carnes Lord

Daniel Deudney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Lord, Carnes and Deudney, Daniel (2023) "Dark Skies: Space Expansionism, Planetary Geopolitics, and the Ends of Humanity," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 76: No. 3, Article 15.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol76/iss3/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

battles. That October he was attached to Admiral William F. “Bull” Halsey’s Third Fleet during the Battle of Leyte Gulf. On 24 October, Halsey sent out a radio message announcing that he intended to establish TF 34 under Lee’s command. Centered on four battleships, the surface force would guard the San Bernardino Strait to forestall a Japanese assault on General Douglas MacArthur’s landing force on the island of Leyte, as well as its offshore naval guardians.

But the new force never took station as Halsey envisioned. Admiral Lee urged Halsey’s staff, embarked aboard the battleship *New Jersey*, to form TF 34 but to dispatch it for picket duty, while leaving Halsey’s main fleet to pursue a Japanese carrier group steaming to the north of the Philippine Islands. He expressed himself clearly and forcefully via flashing light and radio, but stopped short of seeming to pick a public quarrel with Halsey. As one of his staffers put it afterward, Lee “wasn’t a heckler, as such” (p. 226).

The result was that the strait remained unguarded, and on 25 October the Japanese task force pummeled the remaining U.S. naval force off Samar. Only heroics on the part of destroyer sailors and carrier aviators, and an apparent loss of heart by the Japanese commander, Admiral Takeo Kurita, warded off an outright debacle. Halsey rightly bore most of the criticism for the command breakdown, but you have to think that some of it splattered onto Lee’s legacy by association. Such “what-ifs” are the stuff of historical debate.

In the end, then, Willis Lee comes off as a commander any sailor would relish serving with, possessed of the right stuff as measured in character and technical acumen. His life is also

a reminder that ill circumstances can ensnare even the doughtiest warrior.

JAMES R. HOLMES



Dark Skies: Space Expansionism, Planetary Geopolitics, and the Ends of Humanity, by Daniel Deudney. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020. 464 pages. \$30.

This extraordinary and important book challenges many contemporary orthodoxies. Above all, it challenges the way we commonly think about space and the future of humanity. But it does so in the context of a broader argument—developed in the author’s earlier work *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (2007)—that upends the accepted framework of international relations theory. It does so through a rediscovery of American federalism—a device that Deudney argues provides a novel and powerful solution to the problem of the historical fragility of republican government.

The core contention of *Dark Skies* is that what the author calls “space expansionism” is an ideological project derived from simplistic assumptions about science and technology, as well as from a completely inadequate understanding of the geopolitical and security implications of humanity venturing into space. In the first place, Deudney argues that, in spite of astounding advances in science and technology over the last century and more, the Baconian promise that modern empirical science would bring about the “conquest of nature” for the benefit of humanity remains fundamentally a fantasy—particularly

when applied to the radically hostile environment of outer space. Second, he tries to show that even if this were not the case, the rationale for space expansion is weak, while its potential negative and even catastrophic consequences have been underestimated grossly, if not simply ignored. Third, he argues that there has been little serious thought given to the social, cultural, and political dimensions of life in space colonies, or to the security challenges of an actual or potential international system spanning our solar system.

The space expansionist project as described by Deudney has many variations, but some common features stand out. Perhaps most important is the influence of a century of science-fiction literature (whether conscious or otherwise) on the way that even scientists today think about these matters. The grand horizons portrayed in this literature are inspiring and tend to foster a sense of the inevitability of man venturing into space, “the last frontier.” They seem to hold out a human future that provides a true “end of history,” perhaps including a further evolution of the human species itself into a higher form of life. Some versions of this kind of thinking veer away from science per se, in the direction of visionary or quasi-religious speculation. One might note in passing that this is not the only area of popular science today that has taken on a religious tint.

It is impossible to do justice to this book in a brief review, but a few things may be singled out. As far as our inability to control nature is concerned, Deudney points out that serious questions remain about the extended effects of a prolonged presence in space on the human body, including human

reproduction (a potential showstopper for interstellar space travel). Deudney includes an extensive discussion of military space activities, arguing that the militarization of space is already in full bloom, given the existence of ballistic missiles as well as military satellites of all kinds. He is favorable toward strengthening existing arms-control regimes in space, especially to address the growing problem of space debris and its potential for igniting accidental nuclear war. He even goes so far as to envision a future—one presumably without the current Russian and Chinese regimes—in which ballistic missiles would be banned completely.

As far as the politics of space colonies, he argues that easy assumptions concerning the transferability of liberal and democratic practices to such places are totally unwarranted; rather than laboratories of participatory democracy, they are more likely to be dystopian tyrannies. In terms of warfare in space, he warns that it would be exceedingly destructive, given the fragility of space vehicles and infrastructure. He is particularly emphatic in calling attention to the potentially catastrophic danger of weaponizing asteroids—even while acknowledging the arguments often made that technologies of asteroid deflection must be pursued to protect Earth from the (not unlikely) prospect of asteroids or comets colliding with us, as has happened regularly in the deep past.

Deudney does not want readers to think he is a Luddite about space or space technology, and he develops his own program of relatively limited steps that could be taken in the near future. But beyond that? Say, a colony on Mars? His answer: an emphatic no.

CARNES LORD