

War in and through the heavens

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Pentagon Has Far-Reaching Defense Spacecraft in Works

Bush Administration Looking to Space to Fight Threats

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[EXCERPTS]

The Pentagon is working to develop a suborbital space capsule within the next five years that would be launched from the United States and could deliver conventional weapons anywhere in the world within two hours, defense officials said.

This year, the Falcon program will test a launcher for its Common Aero Vehicle (CAV), an unmanned maneuverable spacecraft that would travel at five times the speed of sound and could carry 1,000 pounds of munitions, intelligence sensors or other payloads. Among the system's strengths is that commanders could order a CAV -- an unpowered glide vehicle -- not to release its payload if they decided not to follow through with an attack.

The first-generation CAV, expected to be ready by 2010, will have "an incredible capability to provide the warfighter with a global reach capability against high payoff targets," Gen. Lance W. Lord, commander of Air Force Space Command, told the House Armed Services Committee last Wednesday.

Within the next three years, the Falcon program hopes to enter a second stage of the effort: flight-testing two versions of a reusable hypersonic cruise vehicle, sometimes referred to as a space plane, that could travel a suborbital path, about 100,000 feet high,

carrying a CAV anywhere in the world. Unlike a missile, the vehicle could return to its base after releasing the CAV to deliver bombs or intelligence sensors.

The Falcon program vehicles "will improve the military's ability to quickly position intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance payloads, while reducing its reliance on forward and foreign basing," Anthony J. "Tony" Tether, director of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), told a Senate Armed Services subcommittee last week.

[snip]

In congressional appearances over two weeks, Lord, Tether and other senior Pentagon officials have described a variety of new space initiatives for meeting challenges such as updating intelligence and communications satellite programs and even fielding systems that would allow the United States to temporarily silence enemy satellites if the need arose.

Space communications have already become important to U.S. warfighting. As Lord put it, "Our most recent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq prove our nation relies on capabilities coming from and through space more than ever before." For example, more than 60 percent of all communications at the height of Operation Iraqi Freedom came through satellites, which also guided munitions to targets and today transmit intelligence from the United States directly to troops fighting in the field.

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In addition to creating attack weapons, the Pentagon is working on new defense systems to protect the ever-more-important satellites the United States has in space.

"I think everybody that I know in the United States military and the Department of Defense understands the important role that our space assets play in our national security," Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee last Thursday.

Last October, the Pentagon announced deployment of its first mobile ground-based system that could

temporarily disrupt satellite-based communications from an enemy satellite. The counter-communications system uses powerful electromagnetic radio frequency energy to silence transmissions from a satellite in a way that is reversible if the need passes. Two more units are due later this year.