

The Space Force Is in Danger of Becoming Half the Service It Needs to Be—Congress Must Continue Its Robust Support

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Air Force should complete the methodical, but expeditious, transfer of all its space personnel and assets to the Space Force by the end of 2021.

Congress should continue robust funding of the Space Force to prepare it to absorb all space personnel and assets from the Department of Defense.

The 2021 National Defense Authorization Act should mandate transfer of all Department of Defense space assets and personnel to the Space Force by the end of 2025.

The United States Space Force, the sixth branch of the U.S. Military, was established on December 20, 2019; at three months it appears to have already experienced the unpredictable nature of the federal budgeting process.

The President's fiscal year (FY) 2020 budget requested more than \$72 million¹ in funding to get the new service up and running, but by the time the Defense Department appropriations bill was signed in December, Congress had budgeted little more than half that amount²—just \$40 million was enacted. While paltry on the surface, the \$72 million was a funding estimate based on the assumption that Congress would establish a space force, but with no certainty on when funding would arrive, how big this new service would become, or how fast it could grow to that level.

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Of the \$72 million, \$53 million was budgeted for operations and maintenance (O&M) and for studies to determine, among other things, the new service's future manpower requirements.³ That amount was based on a full year of spending, not a budget that would be approved three months into the fiscal year. As it turns out, nine of 12 months (nine-twelfths) of a \$72 million budget equates to \$39.75 million, and Congress actually appropriated \$250,000 above that amount for O&M.

But what about the funding for personnel? The President's 2020 budget set aside \$19 million to fund manning for the Space Force, including 160 new billets to establish the service's headquarters.⁴ As the Air Force explored the mechanism to pay Space Force personnel, several technical challenges arose within the Department of the Air Force (DOAF) military personnel system that would not allow the new service to readily pay its own personnel. For the time being, that task and the associated funding will remain with, and be paid to, Space Force personnel by the Air Force. Once an integrated DOAF pay system is fully operational, funding for personnel will be shifted directly to the new service.

With the re-designation of Air Force Space Command (AFSPC) as the U.S. Space Force, approximately 16,000 military and civilian personnel were assigned to support this new service, but only a handful have officially transferred to the Space Force. Most are still wearing the same uniforms, holding the same seats, and inhabiting the same offices they occupied a year ago.⁵ Still, many of the details of this new service are still in question: the ideal size of the organization, its rate of growth, and the amount of additional funding needed to meet these requirements.

When Congress authorized the Space Force through the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), it limited the scope of the new service to Air Force personnel and assets, equating to a total workforce of 27,300⁶ personnel and organizations on five major installations.⁷ Those organizations include the 21st Space Wing at Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado; the 30th Space Wing at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California; the 45th Space Wing at Patrick Air Force Base, Florida; the 50th Space Wing at Schriever Air Force Base, Colorado; and the 460th Space Wing at Buckley Air Force Base, Colorado. Methodically expanding the Space Force to include all DOAF military and civilian personnel at those locations will likely take at least another full year to complete.

Still, even when combined with the new geographic combatant command for space, a service formed only out of Air Force assets will not remedy the dysfunctional oversight or command and control issues that the Space Force initiative was intended to resolve.⁸ In order for that to

happen, the remaining 21,200 space professionals in the Army and Navy⁹ need to be incorporated into the Space Force. The Army organizations should include the Army Space and Missile Defense Headquarters (Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama);¹⁰ the 1st Space Brigade (Colorado Springs, Colorado); the 100th Missile Defense Brigade (Colorado Springs, Colorado; Schriever Air Force Base, Colorado; and Fort Greely, Alaska);¹¹ and the the Space and Missile Defense Acquisition Center (Huntsville, Alabama). The Naval organizations and assets that should transfer include components of the Naval Warfare Systems Command (formerly the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command, San Diego, California)¹² and the Navy Satellite Operations Center (Naval Air Station, Point Mugu, California).¹³

There are several impediments to bringing those additional organizations and assets into the fold. Often, seemingly exhausted by the passage of landmark legislation, Congress is reluctant to modify its “masterpiece.” That phenomena may limit the ability to make continued progress. If history is a guide, the Army and Navy will also push back on the demand that they give up *their* space professionals with the argument that only members of their own service can truly provide integrated space support, but there are many examples of other services taking on critical tasks for the others. Air Force Forward Air Controllers (FACs) and Joint Tactical Air Controllers (JTACs) have supported the Army for decades,¹⁴ and Navy corpsmen have supported the Marines. Both roles were often executed in close proximity to the enemy, which would seem to undermine the argument that space professionals, who will generally be located far away from the front lines, could somehow not support either service effectively.

One last, but very significant, obstacle will be the ongoing battle against the coronavirus. The incredible emotional and fiscal weight of the ongoing pandemic will continue to consume the attention of the Administration, Congress, and the services for the months to come. Collectively, these issues will diffuse the light that has been on the Space Force, but Congress should not waiver in its efforts to follow through.

Bringing it all together is estimated to add an additional \$500 million to the Defense Department’s annual budget,¹⁵ but the enhancements those moves will bring are significant. To that end, the 2021 NDAA should mandate that the Defense Department move the space professionals from all the services into the Space Force by the end of FY 2025. Going big will eliminate unnecessary redundancies, streamline space oversight and command and control, and enhance combat capability.

Conclusion

The capabilities that the Space Force can provide the Department of Defense are vital to the nation's defense. That fact, coupled with the minimal cost and robust impact a unified space force can have, makes the investment a fiscally and operationally prudent one. Therefore:

- **The Air Force should continue the methodical, but expeditious, transfer of all of its space professionals** to meet the timeline the Space Force establishes—but it should be completed by the end of FY 2021.
- **The Department of Defense should ensure that all space professionals in the Army and Navy have been identified**, and that those services are preparing the identified for their transfer to the Space Force beginning in October of FY 2022.
- **Congress should continue its robust funding of the Space Force, and use the 2021 NDAA to mandate** the transfer of all Army and Navy space organizations, personnel, and assets to the Space Force by the end of FY 2025.

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Endnotes

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5. U.S. Air Force, Assistant Secretary for Financial Management and Budget, *United States Air Force Fiscal Year 2021*, Budget Estimates—Operation and Maintenance, Space Force,” Vol. I, p. 86, https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/Portals/84/documents/FY21/OM_/SPACE/FY21%20Space%20Force%20Operation%20and%20Maintenance%20Vol%20I.pdf?ver=2020-02-10-154447-557 (accessed March 26, 2020).
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13. “US Naval Satellite Operations Center Takes Control of Fifth MUOS Satellite,” NavalToday.com, November 17, 2017, <https://navaltoday.com/2017/11/17/us-naval-satellite-operations-center-takes-control-of-fifth-muos-satellite/> (accessed March 24, 2020).
14. The author served as a Forward Air Controller from 1984 to 1987 with a U.S. Army Battalion tasked with defending NATO on the Czech border.
15. Harrison, “How Much Will the Space Force Cost?” U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command, “SMDC Organization.”