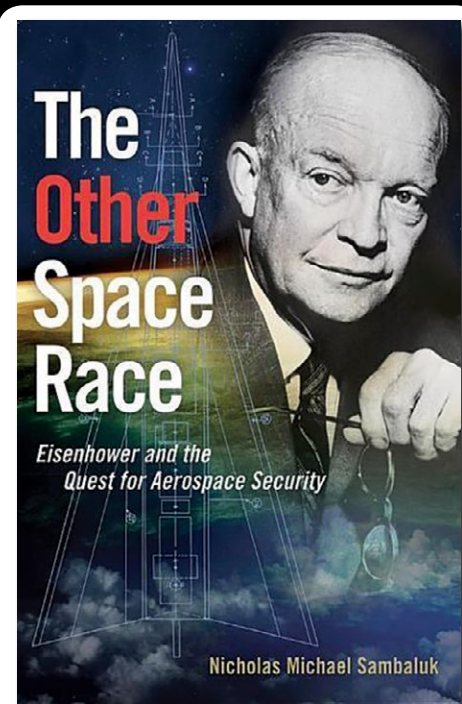


REVIEW ESSAY

The Other Space Race

Eisenhower and the Quest for Aerospace Security

Nicholas Michael Sambaluk, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 2015, 316 pages



Lt. Col. John H. Modinger, PhD, U.S. Air Force, Retired

The *Other Space Race* is a fascinating look at the early years (1954–1961) of the celebrated “Space Race” between the United States and the Soviet Union. It is full of fascinating sidebars fleshing out the context of the times in vivid detail and peaking with the lunar landing in 1969.

Regrettably, until now, President Dwight D. “Ike” Eisenhower’s role has received rather superficial treatment in this race saga. Many mistakenly derided his administration as being caught off guard by the Sputnik launches and supposedly playing mere catch-up. However, *The Other Space Race* highlights an important reality: Eisenhower was far more programmatic in his approach to space and more intimately involved in the strategic policy-level decision making than is generally acknowledged. Much of this oversight is understood through the lens of his leadership style. Historian Stephen Ambrose, an Eisenhower biographer, noted that Ike “had gotten through many a crisis simply by denying that a crisis existed.” In the aftermath of Sputnik, his usual resort to calmness failed to quell the uproar, but his ability to shape the direction of U.S. space exploration would influence policymaking thereafter.

The book is much more than an account of Eisenhower’s personal involvement. The inherent tension is clearly exposed between Ike’s desire to use space as a window into Soviet capabilities to prevent misperception and worst-case thinking—quite possibly leading to nuclear Armageddon—and the Air Force’s contrarian approach foreseeing space weaponization as inevitable. A newly independent, brash Air Force viewed itself as the vanguard of American defense in a future dominated by spiraling technological feats where second place—so its leaders argued—would consign the Nation to certain doom against a relentless Communist foe intent on domination.

Sambaluk unambiguously illuminates how disconnected Air Force senior-leader thinking was from the strategic initiatives Eisenhower was trying to crystallize at the dawn of a new frontier. A clear example of these competing philosophies regarding how best to achieve space security was the “Dyna-Soar” project. A focal point throughout the book, it was a piloted, reusable, boost-glide spacecraft that launched like a rocket and recovered by landing like an unpowered glider. To supporters, Dyna-Soar would enable the United States to control the “ultimate high ground.” To detractors, the project

was an overly ambitious fantasy given the state of many necessary supporting technologies, was fiscally irresponsible during a recession, and jeopardized the peaceful methods Eisenhower was keen on pursuing to keep a lid on competition and expenditures. In a telling comment, Sambaluk has a bit of fun noting Dyna-Soar would eventually go the way of the “dinosaur,” but acknowledges that in 1957, in the hysteria following Sputnik, it seemed quite possible that it would go from concept to creation, with all that entailed.

Sambaluk lucidly explains Ike felt that the superior American space technologies could pierce the seemingly opaque Soviet military system. He was supremely confident satellites, once operational, would expose the so-called “bomber gap” and “missile gap” as gross distortions of reality, derailing agendas demanding ever greater spending on yet more weapons of war—or so he thought. Eisenhower’s “Open Skies” initiative sought tangible verification of capabilities through routine, unencumbered space overflights; however, Khrushchev, suspicious of sinister designs, thwarted the proposal. Of course, once Sputnik was aloft and transmitting, overflight became a nonissue and actually facilitated Eisenhower’s goal, since Sputnik’s successive orbits set a precedent by default when the United States did nothing to hinder its path.

“Gently in manner, strongly in deed” defined Ike’s approach to politics. His distinct leadership style forged combined allied military victory in World War II by helping him to manage the ceaseless juggling of fractious agendas, competing priorities, and clashing personalities. That same wholesome, friendly demeanor and tact served him well through his first presidential term. With great nuance, Sambaluk compellingly argues this executive style—the hidden hand—worked well when the international scene was relatively tranquil. But, when the situation became tumultuous, Eisenhower’s style was often misinterpreted, or mischaracterized as disengaged, out of sync, and aloof.

The author artfully captures Eisenhower’s persistent frustration in trying to regain control of the initiative in the space race while tamping down unbridled, expensive, and antagonistic programs, which continually threatened to slip the leash in the wake of Sputnik I and II and

further destabilize Cold War relations. Certainly, much of Ike’s heartburn in this area is attributed to his unwillingness to compromise classified insights that would have thrown cold water on ridiculous claims about the true state of affairs. The book marvelously captures Ike’s disdain for getting down in the political trenches that did not help his cause. He saw himself as a unifier who refrained from engaging in overly partisan politics. Ike also had an abiding faith that “public opinion is the only motivating force there is in a republic or in a democracy,” and he was loathe to defy it. He felt “public opinion must be ... informed ... if it is going to be effective.” This was a real test for the average citizen, putting aside their mostly pedestrian concerns, given the classified and complex nature of many of the issues.

In his “Epilogue and Conclusion,” Sambaluk succinctly analyzes larger themes of the time: the transition from Eisenhower to John F. Kennedy, and Air Force rationale for pushing so hard in seeming opposition to Ike’s goals. Near the end, he delivers a few diamonds. First, in Kennedy’s worldview, international politics drove the moon-landing race. He once told the NASA director, quite candidly, that if not for that imperative, “we shouldn’t be spending this kind of money, because I’m not that interested in space.” This would come as a shock to those who so closely associate Kennedy with the moon mission. Second, by the mid-1960s, NASA’s public affairs office was saying “we are in a new phase of our program ... each flight is not going to be spectacular” and it recommended NASA leadership should “discourage ... activity, such as ticker-tape parades” for future astronauts. Again, this runs against the grain of prevalent contemporary thinking on the subject, and the author captures it eloquently. Finally, he provocatively suggests Eisenhower’s now-revered farewell address, which cautioned American society about the insidious and growing power of the military-industrial complex, “represented an admission of defeat more than a warning for the future.”

Overall, a splendid rendering of the behind-the-scenes complexities of early American space-policy formation as leaders wrestled with appropriate responses and future direction at the height of an increasingly heated Cold War. ■

Biography

Dr. John H. Modinger, lieutenant colonel, U.S. Air Force, retired, is an assistant professor in the Department of Joint Interagency and Multinational Operations at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.