

## Why defense hawks are gunning for Trump's Space Force

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Republican Reps. Steve Knight of California and Mike Coffman of Colorado would appear the ideal champions of a new military branch focused on space.

Three of Knight's top five donors are aerospace giants Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin and Honeywell, which would be well-positioned to help build and outfit it. And Coffman's district is an epicenter of the military's current space operations.

Instead, the pair is leading the rebellion to President Donald Trump's Space Force — one that some observers believe bears the fingerprints of the Air Force and its contractors.

As the Pentagon drafts its legislative proposal for what the Space Force will look like — and what it will cost — the Trump administration is running into growing opposition from GOP and Democratic lawmakers, retired Air Force generals and others who think it's a bad idea.

The skeptics fear that carving the new branch out of the Air Force, as Trump proposes, would siphon resources from other defense programs, strip them of authority or even weaken the military. They include lawmakers who serve on committees with direct jurisdiction over the issue — such as Knight and Coffman, who both sit on the Armed Services panel.

They pose a potentially fatal danger to the president's proposal, which needs Congress to overcome a host of financial and logistical obstacles to carry out what would be the most sweeping U.S. military reorganization since the creation of the Air Force out of the Army Air Forces in 1947. Already, some leading players are predicting Trump will not get everything he wants.

"I think it's a really bad idea," Coffman, whose district includes Buckley Air Force Base and the 460th Space Wing, said in an interview. "I have worked to reduce the size of the Pentagon bureaucracy. And now we have a plan by this administration to expand that bureaucracy by creating a whole new branch of military service — a department of space — without, I believe, a commensurate increase in capability."

Coffman agrees that the Air Force must do more to confront Russian and Chinese threats in space. But he says the right approach is a new law passed by Congress earlier this summer that creates a new space command drawing on elements of all branches headed by a four-star general — along with other reforms underway in the Air Force.

"That is the direction that we need to go and not creating this entirely new department," Coffman said. He vowed to be "a leader of the opposition in the Armed Services Committee to make sure that plan never sees the light of day."

Knight, whose district abuts Edwards Air Force Base, sounded a similar theme during a recent hometown gathering.

"This is something where, boy, I gotta disagree with the president," Knight remarked at the time. "I'm standing up for the U.S. Air Force here. There's nobody on the planet that does this better than they do."

Another recent sign of the challenge facing Trump is his mixed success in enlisting the crucial support of the new Senate Armed Services chairman, Oklahoma Republican Jim Inhofe, who — despite personal entreaties from Defense Secretary Jim Mattis — recently told reporters he's not convinced a Space Force is worth the cost.

Some industry executives have publicly warned that creating a Space Force could be a "big distraction," while government space leaders have expressed concern it could create lots of overhead but do little to better defend the United States' space assets or enhance its power.

"The administration faces a big uphill battle on the budget side, in addition to the other bureaucratic challenges," said Brian Weeden, a space policy expert at the Secure World Foundation who is tracking the debate closely. "It's hard to see a scenario where the Space Force doesn't need a bunch of additional money to not only fund the reorganization but also all the new programs and capabilities."

He added: "That means any new money for Space Force will likely have to be taken from the budgets for the Army, Navy, Air Force or Marines. And that is going to be a very uphill battle for the Space Force proponents."

Leading representatives of the defense and aerospace industry have been careful not to take a public position on the proposal until more detail is available — in part not to get crosswise with Trump — but they have also raised major questions.

"Is this going to get us to something faster or is it going to slow us down more?" asked Eric Fanning, the president and CEO of the Aerospace Industries Association, one of the defense industry's largest advocacy groups, who previously served as secretary of both the Army and the Air Force.

"And secondly, who's going to pay for this?" he added in an interview. "The aerospace and defense industry builds things. It's not going to benefit by money going into creating new headquarters, new organizations. Someone even mentioned a new service academy."

The proposal has also inspired simmering resistance inside the Pentagon, according to current and former military officials and Defense Department civilians.

Military leaders have found themselves in an awkward position. Before Trump ordered the establishment of a separate Space Force in June, both Mattis and Air Force Secretary Heather

Wilson were dead set against the idea — and even pushed back on a less ambitious proposal in the House to establish a Space Corps within the Air Force.

Wilson has since emerged as one of the biggest backers of Trump's order, pledging last week to deliver a "fulsome" proposal for the Space Force to Congress later this year.

"I would expect that that department would have a full array of authorities and capabilities just as I have in the Air Force," including its own acquisition arms to develop and buy space systems, she said. "If we're going to do this, let's propose it and do it right."

Remaining internal resistance to the Space Force has thus been left primarily to former officials.

One turning point came in late July, when former Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James warned that a Space Force "will sap resources away that could otherwise go to capabilities."

"I think there will be a ton of workforce issues," she added. "You can organize and reorganize in any way you could think of, but the real question is the juice worth the squeeze? You will spend years ... I'll bet it's five to 10. ... Eventually, it'll settle out, but you will go through years of thrashing."

Her remarks were widely seen as channeling the beliefs of some serving Air Force leaders. "None of them are in favor of a Space Force — I say none of the top leaders — but they're stuck," she said. "The president has said it and it will be interesting to see how they now deal with it."

One devious but well-worn tactic the Pentagon could use to undermine the proposal would be what one military space official calls the "internal bureaucratic warrior" approach.

"What I would do is put in every single cat and dog that I could possibly imagine for a service," said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly. "I'd make sure it had its own [military lawyers], I'd make sure it had its own dentists, its own IT. Make it the most expensive to separate from the Air Force as possible."

Another approach would be to quietly warn fellow military leaders and defense industry executives that the Space Force might harm their own commands or programs.

"You'd want to inject nervousness and say, 'Hey, listen, you better tell your congressman this is a bad idea because I can't guarantee that a Space Force is going to think this is as important as I do,'" the Pentagon official said.

That may already be happening.

Wilson, the Air Force secretary, has met in recent weeks with several key lawmakers to discuss the Space Force. Those included Coffman, now one of the plan's primary opponents, his office confirmed.

She has also met with Rep. Doug Lamborn (R-Colo.), a member of House Armed Services' influential Strategic Forces Subcommittee, according to his website. His district includes Colorado Springs, home of the Air Force Space Command.

Lamborn, whose office did not respond to a request for comment, issued a statement last month lending his support to efforts already underway to beef up the Air Force's space mission and speed up its acquisition of space capabilities. But he did not address whether he supports establishing a new space branch.

One well-placed defense lobbyist told POLITICO he sees growing indications that the Air Force leadership is quietly trying to enlist lawmakers in resisting a new space branch.

"The Air Force is trying to work behind the scenes to kill it," said the lobbyist, who agreed to speak about his private conversations on the condition he not be identified by name. Wilson "has been lobbying members against it. She is trying to rally her allies on the Hill ... as an effort to delay or defy the Space Force. A lot of this is turf. They don't want to lose jurisdiction."

Wilson has steadfastly backed the president's position in public and said in a statement to POLITICO that "I am completely aligned with the President. There is no greater advocate in the Pentagon for his vision. We have a responsibility to develop and support a proposal for a sixth branch that is bold and advances American dominance in space."

But another lobbyist with space clients, asked about the opposition from Coffman and Knight in particular, said it is increasingly looking like Trump will have few major allies on the Space Force.

"Who is gonna take up the cause for him?" the second lobbyist asked. "If it is not California or Colorado, which is where there is the infrastructure that would benefit the most from a Space Force, who is going to be for it?"

Todd Harrison, director of the Aerospace Security Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said he suspects that Knight's opposition is because the Space Force "would certainly upset the apple cart" among the many Air Force troops in his district.

As for some of the retired generals and other former officials opposed to the Space Force or raising questions, "they want to be seen as loyal to their own service," the first lobbyist added.

For example, retired Gen. Robert Kehler, a former head of the U.S. Strategic Command, pointed to cost concerns about the proposed Space Force earlier this week.

"Somewhere along the way, there needs to be a clear-eyed assessment of the resources it will take," he told a discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The Pentagon is due to deliver a legislative proposal to create a Space Force early next year when it submits its fiscal 2020 budget request.

What's in that plan may say a lot about whether the Defense Department is trying to drag its feet and subversively kill the Space Force, Harrison said.

If the Pentagon is trying to stall or stop the idea, it could recommend a slow implementation that could extend beyond Trump's presidency. Or it could inflate the cost to sour Congress on it.

But the skeptics have their work cut out as well. While the proposal has opponents in both parties, it also has key supporters, including Rep. Mike Rogers, the Alabama Republican who chairs the Strategic Forces Subcommittee, and Rep. Jim Cooper of Tennessee, the top Democrat on the panel.

"The Senate is where the fight is really going to be," Harrison predicted.

Then there's the possibility that Democrats win control of one or both chambers this fall — probably increasing the odds against Trump's proposal.

If that happens, the Pentagon official said, Trump and his allies "will have a permanent challenge with the left and the arms control community."

For now, the money is on a big fight.

"There is the expectation that this is going to get confusing and complicated on the Hill," Fanning said. "I think most people expect that whatever happens doesn't quite look like a full-on sixth service."