

The Road to Heaven: Science Fiction and the Militarization of Space

Readers of the Sunday *New York Times* on March 30, 1986, may have come upon a full-page “Letter to the American People” in the “News in Review” section of the paper, in which it is urged that the most fitting memorial for the seven astronauts killed in the explosion of the *Challenger* would be:

The restoration and enhancement of the shuttle fleet and resumption of a full launch schedule.

For the seven.

In keeping with their spirit of dedication to space exploration and with the deepest respect for their memory, we, the undersigned, are asking you to join us in urging the president and the Congress to build a new shuttle orbiter to carry on the work of these seven courageous men and women.

AS LONG AS THEIR DREAM LIVES ON,
THE SEVEN LIVE ON IN THE DREAM

Following this appeal are four columns in fourteen-point type of the names of the ad’s eighty-eight “underwriters,” plus a ten-point type rabble of nearly two hundred “other contributors.” Most readers will recognize the first name on the list of underwriters, that of Isaac Asimov, and there is a sprinkling of other “name” science fiction and fantasy writers, but the extent to which the list of underwriters is comprised of science fiction professionals—writers, editors, agents, and fans—would only be evident to someone familiar with the field. By my own census, fifty-four of the eighty-eight underwriters have some connection with sf, as do a much smaller proportion of those in small print. Undoubtedly many of the names I don’t recognize are present through the same connection.

For many science fiction writers and fans the perpetuation of a manned space program stands as the central tenet of their faith in mankind’s destiny as explorer and colonizer of outer space—the solar system today, tomorrow the stars. This faith was promulgated long before NASA. Its adherents vary in their sophistication, from Trekkies

dressed in the pajamas of their gods to engineers and physicists in the employ of NASA and related agencies, but it is for all concerned a literal and often fervent faith, and NASA has become the church at which its worship is conducted.

Sf writers have a legitimate claim to be considered not only the prophets of that faith but the builders of the church. If poets are the world's unacknowledged legislators, sf writers have been its unacknowledged civil and mechanical engineers, doodling their designs for rocketships and spacesuits on that most plastic medium, the adolescent mind. The influence of such sf writers of the thirties and forties as Robert Heinlein, Asimov, and Jack Williamson (all three still alive, productive, and signers of the *Times* letter) on the teenage readers who would grow up to staff the space agencies has been widely attested to. The symposiasts at the recent PEN Congress who took as their theme "The Imagination of the State," only to lament that Imagination was what the State specifically lacked, evidently had read little science fiction or failed to consider its relation to the space program. Such an oversight is not to be wondered at, for most literary intellectuals regard sf as Dr. Pritikin would a Twinkie, while a majority of political liberals have similarly disregarded the space program, considering it a relatively harmless boondoggle, useful, if at all, as a sop to the Cerberus of the defense industry. Better a man on the moon than another missile silo in Kansas.

The enthusiasm expressed by President Reagan for the Strategic Defense Initiative, or "Star Wars" program, and his ability to translate that enthusiasm into budgetary reality has made both dismissions—of sf and of the space program—intellectually indefensible. Whatever its merits or demerits as literature, sf's role as a debating society, moral-support system, and cheerleading section for the present and future personnel of space-related industries and military services makes it worth examining simply for what it can show us about the high-tech experts whose expertise will shape the foreseeable future.

The most remarkable of sf's ancestral voices in this regard, and one that is still with us, is that of Robert Heinlein. Heinlein's stories of the near-future conquest of space, which first began to appear in the late thirties, were written in a manner more naturalistic and verisimilar than the naive space operas common at that time. For Heinlein, outer space was not a realm of faery but simply the next frontier, and he was its recruiting sergeant. In 1952 he wrote, "What one man can imagine, another man can do. Youths who build hot-rods are not dismayed by spaceships; in their adult years they will build such ships. In the meantime they will read stories of interplanetary travel."

Heinlein was not alone in this ambition, nor was he even the chief prophet laureate of the conquest of space. Those laurels must go to Arthur Clarke. However, claims of priority, preeminence, or uniqueness obscure one of the genre's salient strengths, that much sf inhabits a consensual future that is open (since ideas can't be copyrighted) to all comers. Michel Butor in an essay on sf written in 1960 deplored the heterogeneous nature of the genre's too individualistic writers. He called for the genre to become "a collective work, like the science which is its indispensable basis":

Now, let us imagine that a certain number of authors were to take as the setting of their stories a single city, named and situated with some precision in space and in future time; that each author were to take into account the description given by the others in order to introduce his own new ideas. This city would become a common possession to the same degree as an ancient city that has vanished; gradually, all readers would give its name to the city of their dreams and would model that city in its image.

Sf, if it could limit and unify itself, would be capable of acquiring over the individual imaginations a constraining power comparable to that of any classical mythology. Soon all authors would be obliged to take this predicted city into account, readers would organize their actions in relation to its imminent existence, ultimately they would find themselves obliged to build it.

Dismaying as Butor's agenda may sound in its zeal for imaginative conformity, the consensual future that evolved in the natural process of sf writers reading over, and standing on, each other's shoulders very nearly fills Butor's prescription—and has had much the effect that he predicted for it: the city is being built.

Since Hiroshima there has been another element of sf's consensual future that cannot be contemplated with the same hypothetical good cheer and bravado with which mankind's future in space is envisioned. The possibility of nuclear war and its potential for annihilation on a planetary scale have become the defining nightmare of the twentieth century, a consensual future no one admits to consenting to but which no one can resist imagining, and recoiling from. On the whole, sf writers have been as reluctant to think about the unthinkable as anyone else, and their reasons may be rooted in the nature of fiction, which must concern the lives and actions of people, and in the nature of atomic holocaust, which brings all lives and actions to an end. Only a few novelists, and those not

within the genre, have described the worst-case (but not so unlikely) scenario of universal annihilation. The common practice has been to depict a post-holocaust world as a kind of damaged Eden, where a few survivors scavenge a subsistence living from the wreck of civilization. Literally hundreds of novels have been written on this theme, a virtual massed choir of whistling in the dark.

One of the most remarkable of these post-holocaust fantasies is by Heinlein, *Farnham's Freehold* (1964), a book that was to become Holy Writ to the survivalist movement. It was Heinlein's peculiar inspiration to find a silver lining in the prospect of nuclear holocaust. Here his hero (who, with his family, mistress, and Negro servant, has survived a Russian sneak attack by virtue of his prudence in having provided a suburban home with a fall-out shelter) states the case for nuclear Armageddon:

“. . . Barbara, I'm not as sad over what has happened as you are. It might be good for us. I don't mean us six; I mean our country.”

She looked startled. “How?”

“Well—it's hard to take the long view when you are crouching in a shelter and wondering how long you can hold out. But—Barbara, I've worried for years about our country. It seems to me that we have been breeding slaves—and I believe in freedom. This war may have turned the tide. This may be the first war in history which kills the stupid rather than the bright and able—where it makes any distinction.

“Wars have always been hardest on the best young men. This time the boys in the service are as safe or safer than civilians. And of civilians those who used their heads and made preparations stand a far better chance . . . that will improve the breed. When it's over, things will be tough, and that will improve the breed still more. For years the surest way of surviving has been to be utterly worthless and breed a lot of worthless kids. All that will change.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “That's standard genetics, but it seems cruel.”

“It is cruel. But no government has yet been able to repeal natural laws, though they keep trying.”

She shivered in spite of the heat. “I suppose you're right. No, I know you're right.”

The events that follow in *Farnham's Freehold* don't bear out this blithe new application of Social Darwinism (Black Africa, it turns out, has inherited the earth, and enslaved the surviving whites, whose children supply the choicest delicacies at their cannibal feasts—no kidding), but Farnham's

words are not intended ironically. When Heinlein's heroes speak out (the superiority of the warrior caste and the social and biological benefits to be derived from war are among their other recurrent themes), they speak out unequivocally on behalf of their creator.

In recent years, though Heinlein has continued to write in spate, his novels have taken sex as their theme, and while he continues to be able to amaze and appall the liberal imagination like almost no other sf writer, one must turn to the work of those who have inherited his mantle as a concerned and active right-wing ideologue to see the specific and very direct relationship between contemporary sf and the Strategic Defense Initiative. Specifically, the work of Jerry Pournelle.

Pournelle came to science fiction from the space program, having worked for both government agencies and the space division of Rockwell International. Early in the seventies, he began to publish stories in *Analog*, an sf magazine whose editor, John W. Campbell, had discovered and nurtured Heinlein some thirty years before. Pournelle is not a writer notable for inventiveness, thematic range, or dramatic skill. His artlessness may derive in part from a principled aversion to literature, a word with bad associations among those sf writers who identify themselves as "hard-core" (i.e., technophilic and, usually, ultra-right). "Truthfully," he declared, in a 1979 interview, "I don't pay much attention to style. In fact, some people might say they can believe that after reading one of my books, I'm not particularly interested in creating 'literature,' per se. . . . I enjoy writing science fiction. It's easy to write and I'm familiar with the material. It also lets you get across your view of the world, which is something I like doing. In addition, there is the phenomenon of fandom, which is extremely gratifying."

Pournelle's view of the world has been succinctly expressed by the title of a series of anthologies he edits for Tor Books (the fifth volume will appear in September): *There Will Be War*. This series offers its readers nonfiction polemics on that perennial theme of the military-industrial establishment, the need for arms, more arms. Only a strong defensive posture (i.e., SDI) can prevent nuclear Armageddon; a further benefit of SDI is that it will make possible the kind of limited wars that furnish the scenery for the fiction, hairy-chested sf adventures of space-age Rambos. Virtually all of Pournelle's own (non-collaborative) fiction falls into this category, and his enthusiasm for the right defense posture has even led him to creative efforts in the field of military fashion. I remember attending an sf convention in Seattle at which Pournelle, a man of Falstaffian proportions, was boasting that the paramilitary uniform he was wearing

(he and his particular fans, of which there were some two dozen in attendance, all armed to the teeth with an arsenal of toy weapons) had been tailored to his own exacting specifications. None of your off-the-rack camo for the author of *The Mercenary*!

The plot of that book, his first success in the sf field, and those of his later novels are as calculated to offend and outrage liberal sensibilities as a biker's tattoos. In *The Mercenary* (1977) the denouement features the wholesale slaughter of a planet's criminal or unemployed elements (easily decoded as the "permanent underclass" of today's inner cities), who have been assembled by the wily heroine to a vast sports arena for this purpose. When he is not gunning for welfare mothers, Pournelle's favorite villains include traditional Reds and Pinkos (even on the planet Tran in the far future, in the novel *Janissaries* [1979], the threat to liberty comes from "Cuban advisors and Nationalist Front native Marxists"). But his *bêtes noires* are Greens, or "ecosymp," as he prefers to style those who oppose the advance of Science, Technology, Nuclear Power, NASA, and the corporate interests of Rockwell International.

In *Oath of Fealty* (1981), his most readable novel (because it was written in collaboration with Larry Niven, a better storyteller and a cannier ideologue), ecosymp provide the plot with that paranoid requisite, an external enemy whose unremitting and unreasoning malice is the mortar binding together an otherwise doubtfully viable utopian city of the near future. *Oath* represents the fictional apotheosis of Festung Los Angeles, and its story revolves around the moral right of the affluent to create a polity that excludes the poor; this time round, however, the denouement does not decree death to all the losers but has them instead tattooed with the book's recurring slogan: "THINK OF IT AS EVOLUTION IN ACTION."

Most liberal readers would feel as little incentive to read Pournelle's work as to study the writings of Lyndon LaRouche. So long as their tribes do not increase at an alarming rate, why worry? Boys with toy guns at sf conventions pose no substantial threat to democracy or global survival. Not, that is, until they grow up to become the scientific advisors of the president and the defense industry. And that is what has been happening.

In 1984 Pournelle published (with a new collaborator, Dean Ing) a nonfiction book, *Mutual Assured Survival*, that marshalls the arguments that can be made in support of the Star Wars program and presents them in language that can be grasped by the scientific layman. These arguments are not original to Pournelle, but the fervor and pugnacity that he brings to bear have won for the book commendation from no less a

blurb-writer than President Reagan, whose letter to Pournelle is presented in full on the back jacket of the book. Reagan writes:

You and your associates of the Citizens Advisory Panel on National Space Policy [a group of experts that includes among its members Pournelle's collaborators, Ing and Niven, his mentor Heinlein, his son Alexander, Alexander's girlfriend Jennifer, and James Baen, Pournelle's editor at Simon & Schuster, the publisher of the book], deserve high praise for addressing with verve and vision the challenges to peace and to our national security. Efforts like this can assist us in achieving a safer and more stable future for this country, for our allies, and, indeed, for all mankind. Thank you, and God bless you.

With this presidential blessing and his chairmanship of the policy-making Citizens Advisory Council, Pournelle must be considered as more than another polemicist or popularizer writing about SDI. He has become a semi-official spokesman for that initiative. No one would challenge his right to the fictional promulgation of his views, but having entered the arena of a national debate, a debate that will ultimately be resolved by the "experts" on each side, the worldview he evidences in his other writings is not beside the point. Reagan is choosing his team; it would be well to know where that team is coming from.

This is not to suggest that *sf* as a whole, or even most of the underwriters of the *Times* letter, has become a lobby for NASA and the defense industry. Many *sf* writers, notably Frederik Pohl, have been outspoken opponents of SDI.

But the *Times* letter does reflect the strong emotions of that part of the educated public that sees in the space program a compelling national purpose. The desire to get Man into Space may become so overriding an imperative for those who share the "dream of the seven" that they may be willing to advocate SDI solely on the basis of that desire, calculating—probably correctly—that only by ceding the space program to the military will it receive the funding required for such a mammoth effort. Such a calculation would be, perhaps fatally, a mistake.

As to the immediate issue of the rescheduling of the shuttle program, that decision surely must be based on a rational estimation of the program's safety, the soundness of its management, and a cool assessment of the value of the shuttle program as against less costly, unmanned alternatives. None of these questions are addressed in the *Times* letter, which implicitly endorses NASA's position that things are basically still A-OK.

“The production facility still exists,” the letter states. “The assembly process can be reactivated. The experiments designed for the orbiter bay are waiting. We can recover a program which is one of our nation’s greatest resources and mankind’s proudest achievements.” The *Challenger* disaster was undoubtedly a national tragedy, but the “Challenger Campaign” is an ill-judged response that reflects little credit on the science fiction community.