



America's Space Sentinels: DSP Satellites and National Security

Jeffrey T. Richelson

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During much of the Cold War, America's first line of defence was in outer space: a network of secret satellites that could provide instant warning of an enemy missile launch. The presence of these infrared sensors orbiting 22,000 miles above the earth discouraged a Soviet first strike and stabilized international relations between the superpowers, and they now play a crucial role in monitoring the missile programs of China, India, and other emerging nuclear powers. Jeffrey Richelson has written a comprehensive history of this programme, tracing its evolution from the late 1950s to the beginning of the 21st century. He puts "Defense Support Program" operations in the context of world events—from Russian missile programs to the Gulf War— and explains how DSP's infrared sensors are used to detect meteorites, monitor forest fires, and even gather industrial intelligence by "seeing" the lights of steel mills. These satellites, reveals Richelson, detected Iran's test firing of a new missile in 1998 and even provided clues to the cause of the TWA 800 disaster. Drawing on many previously classified documents and on interviews with key participants, Richelson provides a wealth of information: the use of DSP for detecting intermediate-range missiles, false alarms generated following the attempted assassination of President Reagan, the controversial U.S.-Australian DSP partnership, and the role of DSP in Desert Storm. He describes the Slow Walker and Fast Walker programs used to detect aircraft for the U.S. Navy and spacecraft for the Air Force Space Command. And he offers insights into the controversy over what kind of system will eventually replace DSP.

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