

Yanek Mieczkowski. *Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment: The Race for Space and World Prestige*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. 368 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5150-8.



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Published on H-Diplo (July, 2013)

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A Prestige Race in Space: Eisenhower's Sputnik Legacy

October 4, 1957, changed the trajectory of President Dwight Eisenhower's administration. The Soviet Union's successful launch of its first space satellite, Sputnik, tested President Eisenhower in more ways than one. Yanek Mieczkowski's *Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment* illustrates that Sputnik forced Eisenhower to reevaluate his leadership style, his principles, and his approach to U.S. international prestige. Mieczkowski's overall argument is that while Sputnik's launch did not heighten Eisenhower's personal anxiety about the Soviet Union overtaking the United States, it did provide the framework that allowed Eisenhower to grow as president and created the groundwork for a more profound legacy.

Mieczkowski's work analyzes Eisenhower's presidency during the Sputnik episode through three major themes. Firstly, he examines how severely the actual launching of the Soviet's satellite tested Eisenhower's leadership abilities. Secondly, he illustrates that Sputnik was the vital push that led to the creation of Cold War institutions, such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). These programs would address

the immediate space race as well as have long-term benefits for Eisenhower's legacy. Finally, Mieczkowski details the scientific advances of the actual space race and demonstrates that the United States never lagged behind the Soviet Union in space or technological advancements. He highlights these major themes in each of the three sections of his book which chronologically trace the Sputnik incident, its immediate aftermath and setbacks for Eisenhower, and the eventual space successes and legacies of the Eisenhower administration.

Sputnik's significance to Eisenhower's tenure in office and his legacy cannot be understated. Mieczkowski argues that it incorrectly became the measuring stick for U.S. competition with the Soviet Union. For many American citizens, media outlets, and politicians, the Soviet's successful entrance into space destroyed any presumption of American superiority. Space was the next unexplored realm and the United States had not been the first one to reach it. The stigma that the United States now trailed the Soviet Union became the image Eisenhower had to constantly work to overcome. While Sput-

nik itself did not represent an actual defeat for the American space program, its immediate impact severely tested Eisenhower's leadership.

Mieczkowski describes Eisenhower as being a very principled man. His reaction and leadership after the Sputnik launching were both informed and limited by his core set of principles. Mieczkowski claims that Eisenhower had extreme self-control; he was a big proponent of a balanced budget; he valued national security above all other priorities; he resisted calls to increase frivolous military spending; and he believed in secrecy when handling national defense. While these characteristics would at times aid Eisenhower's approach to space, they limited his early management of Sputnik.

Eisenhower's lack of concern over Sputnik is seen in his immediate approach to the incident. He did not believe that the launching was of great significance to American international prestige and hoped that the American people and media would see Sputnik for what he believed it was—a gimmick. He wanted the American people to resist jumping to conclusions about Sputnik and its implications for the U.S. space program. Since Eisenhower viewed the launch this way, he did not work hard in the days immediately following to ease concerns about Sputnik or to counter mounting Soviet propaganda.

Eisenhower also struggled early because he knew that the United States was not behind in space technology. He knew that the truth about space and missile technology was the exact opposite. He had already put in motion the development of systems like the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile as well as started the United States' own satellite project, Project Vanguard. President Eisenhower valued the development of space satellites for their future contributions to national security reconnaissance. Yet he valued secrecy when it came to security issues. Therefore, he did not reveal these early programs and successes to the American people or the world, which in turn fed further into the Soviet Union's propaganda message that the United States was losing the space race. Consequently, Eisenhower's leadership image in the initial weeks after Sputnik suffered.

According to Mieczkowski, Eisenhower soon realized that Sputnik I and II affected the morale of the American people, and he began attempts to restore confidence on the government's ability to compete with the Soviet Union. Eisenhower, along with his new speech writer Arthur Larson, conceived a series of television speeches meant to ensure the public that Sputnik did not rep-

resent a defeat for the United States and to quell calls for increased government spending. Instead, he encouraged Americans to be proud of their economic strength and peaceful lives. However, these TV spots were met with mixed reviews and mounting political pressure. Mieczkowski argues that political pressures ranging from the Gaither Report to public speeches by Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson forced President Eisenhower to accept some increase in military spending for space developments.

Eisenhower's excitement for scientific and technological advancement was often muted by his concerns over increased military spending. Mieczkowski argues that Eisenhower "stressed that the United States could not beat the Soviet Union at everything—nor should it try" (p. 189). He was far more interested in securing international prestige through economic growth and infrastructure improvements. Eisenhower did not believe that winning the space race would prove anything internationally. However, he begrudgingly accepted that the world was judging U.S. prestige according to American successes in the space race.

Even after Eisenhower's reluctant attitude change toward space spending, his administration still struggled showing American achievements. Following his stroke in 1957, Eisenhower's administration suffered several setbacks. His health prevented him from continuing his TV space speeches; mounting pressure forced the early and unsuccessful launch of the Vanguard satellite; and the start of another recession put American international prestige at an all-time low. Knowing he needed immediate success, Eisenhower supported and funded the U.S. Army space satellite Jupiter series, which eventually launched Explorer I, the first U.S. space satellite, in January of 1958. Mieczkowski claims that the successful Jupiter series shows that Eisenhower's fears of combining military and civilian projects were at times "unfounded" (p. 129). He argues that if Eisenhower had been willing to control his own fears of the military industrial complex, the United States would have seen satellite success well before 1958. Nevertheless, Explorer I was truly a scientific accomplishment unlike Sputnik, which did not contribute anything to the international scientific community. Mieczkowski maintains that it was the kick start the United States needed. After Explorer I the United States saw unparalleled success in space.

Regardless of Eisenhower's space successes in 1958 and 1959, his political rivals, like Johnson and John F. Kennedy, used space as one of their primary sources of

criticism of Eisenhower's administration. Mieczkowski states that the Democratic Party needed a "winning issue" and space provided them a platform to criticize Eisenhower's Cold War leadership (p. 138). Even after attempting to include Senator Johnson in American satellite and missile achievements, Johnson and later Kennedy, both presidential hopefuls, used the space race as a way to paint the Eisenhower administration as weak and uninterested. Therefore, Sputnik became the rallying cry for the Democratic Party entering the 1960 presidential election. Hurt by not only the appearance of indifference but also the U-2 plane fiasco, Eisenhower's vice president and Republican Party nominee Richard Nixon had little hope of winning the space race at home. Even after all of the struggles and the realizations about the Sputnik moment, Eisenhower still did not completely understand the role space played in the creation and promotion of American international prestige until Nixon lost the election in 1960.

Eisenhower battled the "Sputnik Syndrome" with the American people, media, and politicians for the rest of his presidency (p. 179). Nevertheless, he was able to use the Sputnik moment to build a long-lasting legacy. Eisenhower's ability to show drastic improvement and interest in space development saved his image and legacy. Eisenhower's achievements post-Sputnik are outstanding. One of his most radical and successful decisions was to push through Congress the National Defense Education Act of 1958 which created loans, grants, and fellowships for those receiving an education in math, science, and foreign languages. His education bill illustrates that he was willing to get past his spending reservations to win the prestige battle. It also created a long-lasting education legacy for Eisenhower.

His other major achievements were the creation of NASA and the solidification of U.S. space and rocket technology. Mieczkowski argues that NASA illustrates how Eisenhower melded his own principles into the new space-oriented world. It reflects Eisenhower's belief in separating civilian and military entities. NASA also provided the perfect foil to the Soviet space programs. While the Soviets worked in secret, NASA was what Mieczkowski calls an "open program"—one open to sharing its findings with the world (p. 281). Likewise, Eisenhower's emphasis on national security and reconnaissance allowed American satellite and missile programs to completely overtake the Soviet Union's. By 1960 the United States' satellites outnumbered Soviet satellites thirty-one to nine. While the president did not like to boast about his various space accomplishments, he "guided one of the most energetic, fast-moving scientific programs in his-

tory" (p. 285). Eisenhower's administration propelled U.S. international space technology throughout the rest of the Cold War.

Finally, Mieczkowski contends that Eisenhower's leadership is seen best in his ability to balance calls from increased military spending and his actual spending for space programs. Fighting off pressures to create what Mieczkowski calls the "space-industrial complex" is one of Eisenhower's most impressive achievements (p. 286). Mieczkowski argues that Eisenhower instead wanted to leave a legacy of meaningful economic investments rather than a bulging space and defensive budget. In the end, he was most interested in ensuring American international prestige through economic strength—not military "stunt" spending (p. 192). According to Mieczkowski, Eisenhower's emphasis on limiting government spending makes his space achievements even more impressive. Eisenhower, the author notes, was able to skillfully and successfully build a strong space program all the while staying true to his principles.

While some connect Sputnik with the start of waning American international prestige, Mieczkowski sees it has a triumph for Eisenhower. He argues that the United States had already reached its prestige pinnacle. Therefore, he concludes that Eisenhower's character and principles actually helped to slow down prestige decline. The president instead provided the bulwark of scientific successes that ensured American space superiority throughout the Cold War.

Overall, Mieczkowski's *Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment* is a well-researched thought-provoking work. It successfully pushes the historical timeframe of the space race back into the Eisenhower years. He skillfully shows that while the launch initially posed serious problems for Eisenhower, Sputnik represents a shining moment for the president. Utilizing a wealth of sources ranging from archival records, personal interviews, and periodical series, Mieczkowski gives his reader an in-depth study of the evolution of Eisenhower's space programs. Continuing in the historiographical trend of reevaluating Eisenhower's presidency and his role as president, he illustrates that Eisenhower took an active role in handling the Sputnik moment. He clearly demonstrates that not only did the president adapt to the new space element in the "prestige race" but he also established long-term programs that thrust U.S. space and science institutions into the future (p. 6). Mieczkowski depicts Eisenhower as a man of steadfast principles, using his core values to guide him in making decisive changes that led the United States through the beginnings of the space race.

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Citation: Autumn Lass. Review of Mieczkowski, Yanek, *Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment: The Race for Space and World Prestige*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

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