

Publisher
Pason Gaddis
pgaddis@florida-weekly.com

Executive Editor
Jeffrey Cull
jcull@florida-weekly.com

Creative Director
Jim Dickerson
jdickerson@florida-weekly.com

Reporters & Columnists

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Nancy Stetson
Karen Feldman
Betsy Clayton
Michelle Start
Evan Williams
Bob Jones
Pete Skiba
Artis Henderson
Carol Simontacchi
Barbara Boxleitner
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Photographers
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Carol Orr Hartman

Contributing Photographer
Jerry Smith

Proofreader
Joanne Anderson

Production
Alex Perez
Amanda Hartman
Kim Boone

Circulation Manager
Penny Kennedy
pkennedy@florida-weekly.com

Circulation
David Anderson
John Noe
Paul Neumann
Rod Irvin
Francie Moser

Account Executives
Shelley Lund
slund@florida-weekly.com
Lyndsey Walsh
lwalsh@florida-weekly.com
Doug Rosburg
drosburg@florida-weekly.com

Business Office Manager
Kelli Carico

Street Address:
Florida Weekly
4300 Ford Street, Suite 106
Fort Myers, Florida 33916
Phone 239.333.2135
Fax: 239.333.2140



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EDITORIAL

Impact at 130 miles

BY RICH LOWRY

Somewhere 130 miles above the Pacific Ocean, tumbling around the Earth at 17,000 mph, a disabled spy satellite met a fiery end late last month — destroyed by a U.S. missile-defense interceptor.

The spectacular hit marks a definitive turn in the debate concerning missile defense, from whether it's technically possible to whether it's ethically desirable. The same people who had argued for years that missile defense couldn't be done now will complain that it constitutes a nefarious "weaponizing of space."

The U.S. normally isn't in the business of shooting down satellites. It took out the dead National Reconnaissance Office satellite because it had a full, 1,000-pound tank of toxic rocket fuel that there was some slim chance could fall on a populated area when it re-entered the atmosphere. Now, the hydrazine fuel appears to have burned up in an explosion in space, and small pieces of the 5,000-pound satellite — about the size of a school bus — will fall harmlessly to Earth.

The satellite wasn't a missile launched with just minutes warning, but hitting it is still a major success for our missile-

defense system. The window for a successful strike was about 30 seconds, the speeds involved were mind-boggling and the same technologies that would be deployed against a missile were in play.

The Chinese immediately lashed out. A Foreign Ministry spokesman said that they will continue to monitor "the possible harm caused by the U.S. action to outer space security." The Chinese commitment to "outer space security" was recently exemplified by their shooting down an aging weather satellite with no warning, then denying they had done it, and doing it at an orbit so high that 1,600 pieces of space debris will clutter Earth's orbit for years.

The Chinese test — of a system explicitly designed to target satellites — didn't produce much outrage from arms controllers. It's long been an axiom of arms control that whatever the U.S. does is dangerous and a provocation to other countries, while our adversaries are merely forced into hostile or irresponsible acts by our recklessness. But the U.S. position on space — like our position on the high seas — is that everyone should have full and free access to it for peaceful purposes.

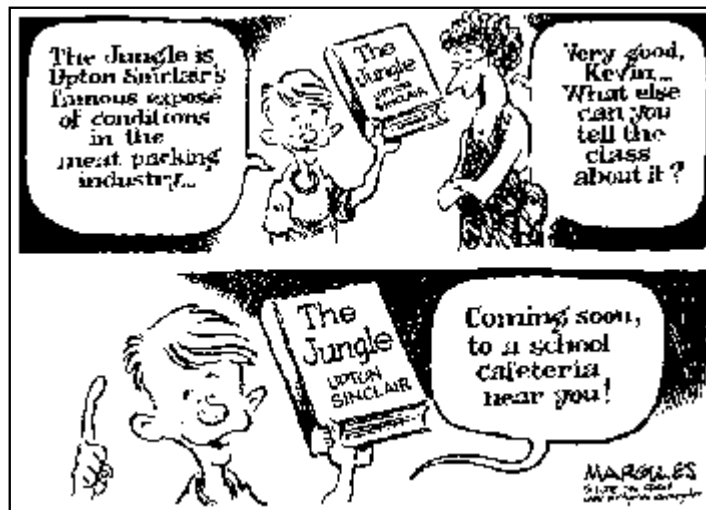
This is how deep the Chinese and

Russian commitment to the peacefulness of space runs: They want to have the option of launching ICBMs out into space where they will travel undisturbed until they re-enter Earth's atmosphere on their way to visiting untold devastation on a target. The Chinese could make a genuine gesture toward peace in space by ending their rapid buildup of ICBMs, but their true interest is in preventing us from checking their missile threat.

Space has been weaponized at least since the Germans launched V-2 rockets against Britain. Today, we use satellites not just for commercial purposes, but for intelligence and military command and control. That's the reason the Chinese are so keen to be able to shoot them down. Space isn't a pristine last frontier unsullied by human competitiveness and ferocity, but an extension of our flawed world down here below. It can be dangerous, which is why it's a comfort that we are building defenses against threats more serious than a tank of hydrazine. ■

— Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*.

OPINION



MOMENTS IN TIME

- **On March 12, 1969**, the London drug squad appears at the house of Beatle George Harrison and wife Pattie Boyd with a warrant and drug-sniffing canines. Sergeant Norman Pilcher, the man behind the raid, was convicted of planting drugs in other cases and went to jail in 1972.

- **On March 13, 1942**, during World War II, the Quartermaster Corps of the U.S. Army begins training dogs for the newly established War Dog Program, or "K-9 Corps." The most famous dog to emerge from the World War I was Rin Tin Tin, an abandoned puppy of German war dogs found in France in 1918 and taken to the United States, where he made his film debut in the 1922 silent film "The Man from Hell's River."

- **On March 14, 1914**, stock-car racer Lee Arnold Petty (father of Richard Petty) is born near Randleman, N.C.

In 1959, he won the Daytona 500. Lee Petty never lost a race on account of being too kind to his competitors, even if those competitors were family.

- **On March 15, 1954**, the Chords record "Sh-boom." The song's light-hearted melody and nonsensical lyrics kicked off a new era of "doo-wop" music. Doo-wop hits included "Earth Angel" by the Penguins and "In the Still of the Night" by the Five Satins.

- **On March 16, 1978**, one of the world's worst supertanker disasters takes place when the Amoco Cadiz wrecks off the coast of Portsall, France. Although it later became a more commonplace feature of television news, this was the first time that images of oil-coated sea birds were seen by the world.

- **On March 17, 1901**, paintings by the late Dutch painter Vincent van

Gogh are shown in Paris. Eleven years earlier, van Gogh had committed suicide without any notion that his work was destined to win acclaim beyond his wildest dreams. In his lifetime, he had sold only one painting.

- **On March 18, 1852**, in New York City, Henry Wells and William G. Fargo join with several other investors to launch their namesake business. In July 1852, Wells Fargo & Co. shipped its first loads of freight from the East Coast to mining camps scattered around northern California.

- **On March 19, 1916**, eight Curtiss "Jenny" planes of the First Aero Squadron take off from Columbus, N.M., in the first combat air mission in U.S. history. They flew a support mission for the 7,000 U.S. troops who invaded Mexico to capture Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. ■