

# On Wells, World Government, and Our Possibly Dystopian Space Future: An Interview with Dan Deudney

Dan Deudney

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Daniel H. Deudney is professor of political science, international relations and political theory at Johns Hopkins University. He holds a BA in political science and philosophy from Yale University, a MPA in science, technology, and public policy from the George Washington University, and a PhD in political science from Princeton University. During the late 1970s he served as senior legislative assistant for energy and environment, and legislative director, in the US Senate. During the early 1980s he was a Senior Researcher at the Worldwatch Institute in Washington D.C. He has written extensively on general IR theory, geopolitics, and republicanism, as well as on nuclear, environment, space and energy. He is one of the leading current theorists of world government – specifically of limited global integration to address security threats, and he serves on the senior Advisory Board for the World Government Research Network.

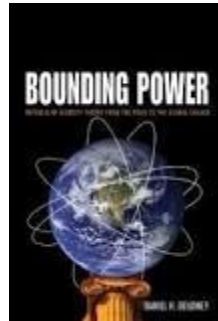
His publications include *RENEWABLE ENERGY* (Norton, 1983), co-author; and *CONTESTED GROUNDS: Conflict and Security in the New Global Environmental Politics* (SUNY, 1998), co-editor. His most recent book is *BOUNDING POWER: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton University Press, 2007), which was co-winner of the Jervis-Schroeder Prize for the best book in international politics and history by the American Political Science Association, and was co-winner of the Book of the Decade award from the International Studies Association. His current book projects are *DARK SKIES: Space Expansionism, Planetary Geopolitics, and the End of Humanity*, and *PAX ATOMICA: Geopolitics, Arms Control and Limited Government*. In over twenty years of teaching he has received four major teaching awards, most recently the Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award at Johns Hopkins University.

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Professor Deudney is interviewed here by World Government Research Network Co-convenor Luis Cabrera.

**WGRN:** *In Bounding Power, you conclude that the appropriate remedy for addressing the dangers of anarchy in the global system, as well as the dangers of concentrated hierarchy under some very powerful global government of the type prescribed by many in the 1940s, is shifting control of nuclear weapons to the global level. This could include having a global-level agency control part of the launch codes, to be released only when certain criteria have been satisfied, among other measures. Yet, you are pessimistic that such a shift will be possible, and you*

*suggest that it may need a nuclear war before it becomes possible. Do you see such a war as a highly likely outcome in the relatively near term, or are there paths by which it could be avoided? If it is avoidable, would you see any other path to actually containing the nuclear threat?*



There are three core arguments I make in chapter nine ‘Anticipations of World Nuclear Government’ in *Bounding Power*. The first is that, with the development of nuclear weapons, violence interdependence has now become intense on a worldwide scale, and that as a result of this momentous development we should anticipate either a catastrophic war, or an exit from anarchy into some form of authoritative world government. Second, the traditional paths to the emergence of a state coterminous with the whole world are blocked. In the past, states were formed when one group gained a militarily dominant position, and subordinated the other actors within a given space. In effect, states were created when there was a breakdown of a ‘balance of power.’ But in the contemporary era, nuclear weapons and the extreme diffusion of violence capabilities mean that this path to state formation is blocked. While it is increasingly easy for actors to destroy one another, it is much more difficult for them to conquer one another. The strong asymmetries of violent power needed to move to a hierarchical state out of anarchy are not likely to re-emerge on the terrestrial Earth. Thus, the paradoxically perverse effect of nuclear weapons is to make an exit from anarchy necessary, but at the same time to impede the traditional path to exit from anarchy. The other traditional reason states emerged was to counter outside threats. But, barring the colonization of space, there is no outside threat to provide the impetus to consolidation. While there are a variety of threats to the security and well-being of all the actors, these threats do not arise from the capabilities and actions of a human group actor, but largely from the unintended consequences of the actions of everyone, and are thus not well configured to provide the impetus for the emergence of a world state.

How might this impasse be surmounted? My third argument is to question the automatic association between a world government and a world state. My key claim is that a contemporary world-wide political consolidation is not best thought of as the erection of a world state marked by a centralization of authority and capability, in effect the Weberian or Hegelian state or nation-state transposed to worldwide scale. Rather, I suggest that the exit from anarchy and toward authoritative government will take the form of a set of increasingly authoritative mutual restraints combined with a parallel demobilization and deceleration of nuclear violence capability.

*Bounding Power* was a reconstruction, and explicitly stopped short of making extensions of the arguments it treated. But elsewhere I have argued that we should think of the nuclear revolution

as rendering obsolete the statist, or ‘real-statist’ mode of protection. By this I mean that the state is a structure of capability and authority that is generated and reproduced by a cluster of distinct practices. These practices were viable, or security functional, for the provision of security in material contexts marked by violence poverty and violence slowness. As a result of the nuclear revolution, we are in a violence rich and fast material context and real-state practices are no longer necessary, and dangerous to the extent they are pursued. In this novel material context, the practices of demobilization, deceleration and deconcentration are necessary for security. The extended application of this alternative ‘republican federal’ set of practices will over time move the overall system out of anarchy, but not toward hierarchy. This alternative mode of protection is operative in the practices of ‘arms control,’ and the only question is whether this project can go far enough and fast enough to avert nuclear catastrophe.

It has often been observed that the two most important questions of the nuclear era are both essentially unanswerable: how likely is deterrence failure (or nuclear use)? And what happens after nuclear weapons are used? My view on the current situation is that the nuclear problem is growing, taking dangerous new forms, and that there is a growing likelihood that nuclear weapons use will occur. In the past I was optimistic that nuclear use would be a catalytic event for a substantial world order reform, or even revolution, a view widely held by many. But I am now less confident that ‘the deluge will lead to the covenant.’ Rather, nuclear use now might trigger an extended period of further arms racing and further nuclear use. This is, of course, a double tragedy in the making. With all the pressing problems the world faces, most notably climate change, it is simply obscene that we are sliding in the wrong direction on the nuclear question.

**WGRN:** *You have been a student of the earlier world government literature, and you have drawn on H.G. Wells in your own work. Which lessons from Wells’ work do you think have been neglected or overlooked in relation to global integration, and which would you want to emphasize to, for example, a graduate seminar?*



Wells *is* a remarkably important figure in the history of international relations theory, and one almost completely neglected in the literature on the history of the field. In part this neglect stems

from the fact that Wells wrote far too much, far too rapidly and his important ideas are scattered across an immense corpus of material. John Partington's book, *Cosmopolis: The Political Thought of H.G. Wells*, has made a signal contribution to Wells and his work by pulling together in one place Wells' ideas about world government and the forces pushing the world toward unification.

Wells is important for my thinking on world government in two ways. First, Wells more than any other writer grasped and articulated the role of technological change in making the world interdependent, and in creating the problems and opportunities that make world government not only possible but increasingly imperative. Before Wells, thinking about material realities in shaping human social and political arrangements was predominantly about the influence of aspects of geography. After Wells, the power of technology in shaping the human world was firmly established as central. And unlike many writers who focused on particular technologies, Wells emphasized that a more general process of technological invention, deployment and diffusion was occurring. As I pointed out in *Bounding Power*, many of Wells' most arresting insights are taken today as commonplaces, and what seemed novel to him and to his wide readership now constitutes the background assumptions for most people who think at all about technology and its influences. From astounding prophecy to banal platitude, in just one century

Wells is today most widely remembered as one of the primary founders of modern science fiction, along with his French predecessor, Jules Verne. Science fiction and the related enterprise of technological futurism are in many ways the most influential modes of imaginative thinking in the machine-based civilization whose coming Bacon had prophesized and whose globalization is now nearing completion. Wells' political thought was in many ways an outgrowth of his scientific and technological futurism. When we now attempt to think about the human ramifications of major new technologies, such as the 'internet of things,' nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, or space colonies, we are essentially following in his footsteps. There is a very real sense in which we are all Wellsians now.

Second, Wells clearly articulates the view, which my work has sought to further develop, that a 'world government' suitable to the circumstances of late or high modernity is not going to be configured anything like an enlarged version of the nation-state that has been so prevalent in recent centuries. In attempting to characterize the features of his anticipated new form of world government, Wells repeatedly employs the languages of republican political thought, and my work has essentially been a continuation of his moves in this direction. Wells formulations are often more arresting than they are clear, but he seems to be making two insights about the 'republican' character of the world government he anticipates. First is that the structure, the arrangement of authorities and capacities, in a non-statist world government will be marked by non-hierarchical patterns, that are functional and federal. Second is that such a polity will depend upon the prevalence of a modernist scientific and technological ethos and ideology. Here the inflection of Wells' 'republicanism' is Platonic, a regime ruled by those who hold knowledges of a distinctive practical value. This strain is most prominent in the 'New Republic' outlined in his *Modern Utopia*. This suggests a 'technocracy' in which those who possess certain technical knowledges will actually rule. But this elitist dimension of his thinking is in turn subverted by his repeated insistence on the universality of technocratic social formation that he anticipates emerging and ruling.

Wells offers starting intuitions, not a fully developed system. Wells is a conceptual experimentalist, not a grand synthesizer. He is an ‘open-ended’ thinker, completely at home in the raging flux of historical innovation and technological change. His work is filled with apparent opposites, and he makes no serious attempt to ‘pull it all together.’ We do not continue his work by a slavish fetishism of his formulations, but by further experimental conceptualizing in ways attentive to the possibilities and perils of new technological possibilities.

Despite his many insights, Wells was a very flawed prophet on many important topics, and his blind spots are glaring. He completely failed to grasp the protean vitality of capitalism. He was completely taken with the political economy of central planning. Wells was also completely blind to the environmental consequences of the industrial modernization he so fervently embraced. He was very much of the ‘conquest of nature’ school, and the major systemic challenge posed by climate change is simply outside his frames of reference. Wells believed that humanity was progressively mastering nature, and so the current revolt of nature against human domination and abuse would be, I think, a very rude surprise to him. As a result of these limitations in his thinking, Wells is not someone that we should embrace as a general guide to the future that is already in so many ways upon us.

**WGRN:** *You have taught on world government at Johns Hopkins, but you remain one of the few in the US or worldwide, for that matter, to offer extended classroom engagement on such topics. More broadly, world government is still treated as something of a ‘fringe’ topic by IR theorists. This despite the fact that you and Alex Wendt, both of whose work has treated global integration issues at some length, have both won the International Studies Association’s ‘Book of the Decade’ award, and despite other prominent scholars in a range of disciplines taking up world government in recent work. Why do you think most ‘mainstream’ IR scholars continue to ignore the topic in their work and teaching? Do you see signs of this changing, in the central streams of IR work and perhaps graduate training?*



Contemporary IR theory has grown greatly in size and theoretical diversity in recent years. There really is nothing like a ‘center of field’ as there once was. Instead of one debate with one research agenda, we have multiple debates and research agendas, many of which are not seriously engaged with each other. My sense is that everyone, aside from a few people who are not paying much attention to the overall patterns in IR, perceives themselves to be a member of a sub-field, an under-appreciated minority.

The degree which one sees ‘world government’ being studied in IR today is very much a function of what one means by ‘world government.’ If one means a ‘world state,’ not many people are studying it. The simple reason IR theorists do not give much attention to studying world government as a world state is that such an entity does not exist. IR scholars, particularly the many who see themselves as doing some version of ‘social science,’ are not going to be studying the world state, simply because there is no world state to study.

If, however, one means by ‘world government’ something less state-like and more structurally amorphous, then a large number of scholars are studying ‘world government.’ Anyone studying international organizations and regimes can be said to be studying ‘world government’ in this broader sense. The fact that such investigations of world-wide authoritative governance arrangements do not characterize what they are doing the study of ‘world government’ is probably the result of the fact that most people take ‘world government’ to mean ‘world state.’

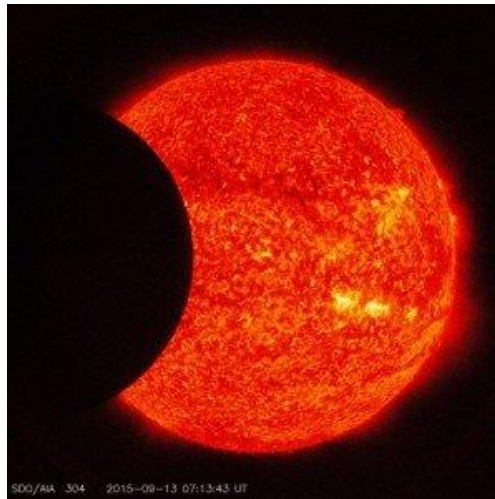
Even scholars who are not bound by a social science focus on ‘what actually is’ do not give much attention to the topic of world government. Various ‘normative’ and ‘critical’ theorists give plenty of attention to political arrangements which do not currently exist, but still give little attention to ‘world government.’ This is something of a sea change from the middle years of the twentieth century, when doing normative and critical IR thinking was typically associated with a robust interest in the possible forms and modalities of a world government. This turn away from world government among normative and critical theorists reflects a general suspicion of the large and the far-away. For many normative and critical theorists, world government is no longer perceived to be a progressive or emancipatory project. Their attention is instead focused on the micro-scale and on globally horizontal networks.

More generally, I think the decline of interest in ambitious world order reform, among scholars, the informed public and leaders, stems from a more general decline of historical memory, political imagination and political realism. The generation which had experienced the great world order crises of the 1930s and 1940s, and which had sacrificed so much to build a decent world order, continued this quest through the 1960s and 1970s. There was a seriousness about statecraft and public discourse in this era which has since been in steady decline. We tend to forget that the post-World War II decades were a golden age in the creation of world public order, and that these efforts were supported and led by both the Soviet Union and the United States. These regimes, the Law of the Sea, the Outer Space Treaty, and many others, are both taken for granted and decaying. We are hurtling into a future of ever rising interdependence and growing shared vulnerability. But the leaders of many major states seem to be rushing into the past, to reaffirm and strengthen their distinctive national and ethno-religious based identities. This decay in political seriousness and realism has been most pronounced — and consequential — in the United States. In many ways the United States has evolved from being a leader in world order reform into its major obstacle. But ‘facts are stubborn things.’ Regardless of the escapist fantasies of market magicians, religious traditionalists, internet libertarians, post modern fantasists, and science skeptics, the rising winds and waters of change will soon enough be forcefully upon us, and the hard work of building international order will be inescapably again upon us.

**WGRN:** *In your forthcoming book, DARK SKIES: Space Expansionism, Planetary Geopolitics, and the End of Humanity, you argue that new security concerns will arise from new space technologies and capabilities. In fact, you have been one of the leaders in theorizing the consequences of space activities since the early 1980s. This new work seems to strike a dire tone. You write in a synopsis of a 2013 talk, that:*

*‘...the creation of large orbital infrastructures will either presuppose or produce world government, potentially of a very hierarchical sort. Space colonies are more likely to be micro-totalitarian than free. And extensive human movement off the planet could in a variety of ways increase the vulnerability of life on Earth, and even jeopardize the survival of the human species.’*

*Can you detail why you believe that such extensive colonization of near space will presuppose or produce a world government on Earth, and why it would be likely to be a very hierarchical one?*



Serious thinking about the expansion of humanity into outer space has been going on for over a century. Positive anticipations of humans colonizing the cosmos permeate public thinking and popular culture, in large measure due to the enormous influence of science fiction. Expectations of the human future in space have been dominated by a body of thought which I refer to as ‘space expansionism.’ The core of space expansionism is the claim that human expansion into space is desirable, perhaps even inevitable. Space expansion advocates also claim that large-scale space activities can solve a variety of important Earth problems. Perhaps most importantly, space expansionists hold that making humanity a multi-world species can help insure the survival of humanity from a variety of catastrophic and existential threats, ranging from nuclear war to asteroidal collision. ‘All of our eggs are in one basket’ as it is often put, and safety is to be obtained by colonizing other places, most notably Mars and the asteroids. This visionary body of thought feeds off claims that the Earth is faced with dire problems, and is thus as much about the situation of the Earth as it is about the prospects for space.

In *Dark Skies* I argue that space expansionist claims for the desirability of large scale space activities are quite dubious when critically examined. Space expansionist thinking is marked by errors in geography, inappropriate geo-historical analogies, and slanted geopolitics. Our largest

space program to-date, the ballistic missile space weapon transportation system for the extremely rapid ‘delivery’ of nuclear explosives, is not even commonly recognized as a space program. But it has had the most momentous consequence of any space activity thus far conducted. Its net impact, I argue, has been to increase the likelihood of catastrophic nuclear war. And what we commonly refer to as ‘nuclear arms control’ has actually been, to a first approximation, space weapons arms control. This ‘dark’ space program, ‘hiding in plain sight,’ has been our most successful space program, as measured by its net positive contribution to human survival and well-being. Taking further steps in this direction to create what I refer to as a ‘whole Earth security system’ is, I argue the most important contribution that space and space activities can play in contributing to the overall human situation.

Looking ahead at the ambitious projects anticipated by space expansionists, I argue that a human diaspora across the solar system will mark the return of the overall human situation to something approximating the ‘archipelago Earth’ that existed prior to the transformations wrought by globalization over the last five centuries. In this anticipated ‘solar archipelago,’ the Earth becomes ‘Island Earth,’ and will be in a disadvantaged position. Also, space expansionists widely expect that humanity will biologically radiate as it spatially expands, perhaps very rapidly with the assistance of emerging genetic engineering capabilities. This means that the objective of space expansionism is a solar system inhabited by multiple intelligent species of life equipped with very advanced technologies. What could go wrong? Space expansionists celebrate this as a great leap forward in the evolution of life, but I point out that this could well bring about the end of humanity.

To a surprising degree, world government is a central topic in space expansionist thinking. But space expansionist views about world government vary widely. Most space expansionists see world government as a problem, and view expansion into space as a remedy. All see the emergence of world government on the Earth as being driven by rising levels of interaction and interdependence. Some hold that a benign form of world government is already here, and argue it threatens cultural diversity and innovation. Others see world government as inevitably coming, and want space colonization as a form of ‘freedom insurance.’ A small number want to wait to embark on large-scale space ventures until some facsimile of world government has emerged, in order to prevent the extension of violent interstate rivalries into space.

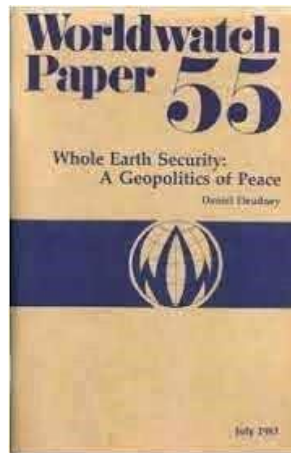
In *Dark Skies* I argue that large-scale space expansion is very likely to produce a world government for the Earth that is highly hierarchical in character, and I see this as one of the reasons to relinquish this set of technological expansions. There are several ways this could happen. First, advocates of large-scale space weaponization openly promote their schemes as a way to effectively eliminate interstate anarchy and the danger of war it entails. Because Earth orbital space is the planetary ‘high ground,’ any state capable of commanding this realm and garrisoning it with capabilities to ‘shoot down’ would be the dominant planetary military actor, and thus a de facto if not de jure world sovereign. Second, hierarchical world government is likely to result from any of the several mega-engineering schemes advanced by space advocates to solve terrestrial resource, energy and environmental problems. Even if intended to be purely peaceful and benign, any such infrastructure has an inherent military capability with planetary reach, and as such it is unrealistic to expect its vast military potentials to remain unexploited.



Third, the expansion of humanity into a multi-world species, the ultimate goal of almost all space expansionists, would also be very likely to produce hierarchical world government on the Earth. (Of course, in such an eventuality, ‘world government’ would no longer have one essential attribute traditionally associated with it – universality, as the Earth would no longer be the sole abode of humanity.) Unless we assume, as do many space expansionists, that inter-world anarchy in a ‘solar archipelago’ would not give rise to the rivalries and conflicts that have been associated with anarchy across Earth history, a human diaspora in the solar system should be presumptively viewed as having large potentials for violent conflicts. The violence potentials in the civil technologies necessary to achieve a robust human diaspora in the solar system vastly exceed those made possible by nuclear weapons technologies. In short, if the space expansionists achieve their visions, Earth will be but one of several, eventually many, inhabited bodies or worlds. In order to secure itself, the ‘Earthians’ will have to become a united actor, and protect their planet with massive space weapons infrastructures in the space vicinity of Earth. The old observation that the Earth could be readily united if only there were some outside ‘other,’ such as Mars, as a threatening rival, captures the basic dynamic that should be anticipated.

Of course, none of this is about to happen anytime soon. But space expansionists continue to believe that major technological breakthroughs, most notably a three order of magnitude reduction in the cost of placing objects into Earth orbit, are within reach soon. Sudden spurts in technological capability do occur, and could occur for space. If the cost of doing things in space had fallen over the last half century as far and as rapidly as the cost of information processing, we would now be vacationing on the moons of Saturn. Once large scale expansion into space gets started, it will be very difficult to stop. My overall point is that we should stop viewing these ambitious space expansionist schemes as desirable, even if they are not yet feasible. Instead we should see them as deeply undesirable, and be glad that they are not yet feasible. Making something more feasible to do should only be viewed as progress if that activity is desirable to do. Lowering the cost of accessing space should be viewed as similar to lowering the cost of enriching uranium, a technological advance that makes more likely the occurrence of something deeply undesirable. In many ways space expansionism is a cosmic extension of the Promethean modernist project initiated by Bacon that is now essentially hegemonic on this planet. Space expansion may indeed be inevitable, but we should view this prospect as among the darkest technological dystopias. Space expansion should be put on the list of catastrophic and existential threats to humanity, and not seen as a way solve or escape from them.

**WGRN:** *Your small book, Whole Earth Security: A Geopolitics of Peace published by the Worldwatch Institute in 1983 continues to have a devoted following, but has not been widely engaged by mainstream security theorists. What ideas do you develop here, and what continuing value do you see them as having?*



Of the fifty or so pieces I have published, I consider *Whole Earth Security* to be the second most important, after *Bounding Power*. There are several ideas that are of continuing value. First is the distinction between global and planetary geopolitics. Geopolitics, which examines the ways in which combinations of technologies and geographies shape politics, is a form of historical security materialism, and entails historical periodization. Although people widely think of global and planetary as more or less synonymous, I argue that the global era, starting with the exploitation of the world ocean as a conduit for interaction, culminates in the early years of the twentieth century with the deployment of the technics of the industrial revolution, most notably the railroad, the steam ship, the electric telegraph, and the submarine and the airplane. In the middle years of the twentieth century, the development of nuclear weapons, the advent of ballistic missiles, the opening of Earth orbital space as a domain for human activities and the increasingly planetary scope of environmental problems, indicate that a new era, that of planetary geopolitics, has arrived. The ‘global Earth’ has now become the ‘planetary Earth.’ The key question is how the territorial states and the ‘cowboy economy’ can be re-configured to the realities of superpower violence capabilities, planetary extraterritorial media, and the closed ‘spaceship Earth’ ecological and geophysical interdependence. In *Whole Earth Security* I characterize a planetary ‘republican’ approach of superpower arms control and the neutralization of extraterritorial media as a program suitable to providing security in the new planetary terrain.

A second set of ideas in *Whole Earth Security* concerns what I referred to as the ‘transparency revolution’ that has been brought about by advances in Earth geo-sciences. As military activities extended into the depths of the oceans, the far-reaches of the atmosphere, and Earth orbital space, scientific investigation of these realms was lavishly funded, and a planet-spanning network of seismic sensors, oceanic hydrophones, and a constellation of satellite sensing platforms created a transparency revolution in which objects and activities could be mapped in real time in these far-flung planetary extraterritorial media. Many were heralding these advances as a positive development, but I pointed out that complete transparency would create a dire security problem, and that only a stubborn ‘opacity residue,’ the non-transparency of the ocean to electromagnetic radiations provided the basis for a secure second strike nuclear force deployment. In short, the abstract calculations of strategic stability prevalent in strategic studies all hinged upon the limits and possibilities of shifting combinations of technologies and geographies. It is notable that the major nuclear weapons states are now embarking upon a major decisions about replacing their major weapons platforms, most of which are decades

old. For the United States, cost estimates range at over a trillion dollars over the next decade. But unlike during the years between the 1950s and 1980s when the existing force structure was put into place, there are growing indications that the oceanic opacity residue has finally succumbed to a combination of improved computational capabilities and cheap autonomous underwater drones.

A third set of ideas concerned the acceleration of violence capability, and the implications this had for the controllability of strategic military forces. My general argument, following the lines of nuclear one world theorists such as John Herz, was that nuclear weapons and rapid weapons delivery technologies had rendered the territorial states militarily inviable. But state military competition was not subsiding but was intensifying. And so, I argued, a growing contradiction should be manifesting itself. This contradiction was taking the form, I argued, of greater acceleration to the point where humans could not plausibly be said to be in control. Rapidly advancing information technologies were making possible the construction of purely autonomous weapons systems, or what I referred to as D.E.A.D., for ‘destruction entrusted automatic devices.’ The underlying problem making such capabilities attractive was the simple fact that the volumes of violence capability made possible by nuclear weapons, and the velocities of violence capability made possible by ballistic missiles meant that ‘there would be no time’ for humans to be ‘in the loop’ on crucial decisions to employ weapons.