



# Why giving the Space Force naval ranks might widen the schism with the Air Force

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Should the U.S. Space Force have naval rank?

Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) has offered up an amendment, which is now part of the House version of the National Defense Authorization Act, stating “the “Space Force shall use a system of ranks and grades that is identical to the system of ranks and grades used by the Navy.”

But the measure will probably face resistance in the Senate, which will need to agree in order for it to become law. And in the Space Force too.

In his new POLITICO op-ed, Brent Ziarnick identifies multiple reasons why the idea has merit. It is necessary to distinguish the Space Force from its Air Force parentage — just like the Navy oversees the Marine Corps. And he also argues that to fully succeed the new branch to be “maritime-inspired,” viewing space much like the high seas, an international lifeline to peace and security and commerce.

Ironically, however, it is these same reasons that are likely to create resistance to the move. Why? Because culture and identity have their own inertia, and because symbols matter by setting priorities which affect both resources and social status.

First, we must remember that despite the large number of officers who have volunteered to transfer to the Space Force, many Air Force space officers still have an established identity of which they are familiar and proud. Many officers opposed the establishment of the Space Force, among them (once upon a time) the person who is now the Space Force’s top officer.

Every step that takes them away from the service in which they grew up feels like a loss of well understood identity in favor of something unfamiliar. Comfortable in an Air Force department with Air Force rank, they worry about feeling awkward in their new titles, as pretenders to naval rank, and that they might be teased by Air Force and Navy personnel alike.

Second, within the Department of the Air Force, the overwhelming institutional push has been to limit the schism caused by the breakaway of the Space Force in order to enable in-department comradery and integration. To those who view the break-up as detrimental, a separate rank system is unwelcome because it accelerates a separate culture and doctrine — thus working against aerospace warfighter integration.

For those who might still harbor secret hopes to “put the Space Force back in the box,” a separate rank system provides an independent identity that would make it much harder to re-absorb the Space Force into the Air Force, should the opportunity to do so arise.

Third, for Space Force leadership, the benefits of a link to science fiction are not clearly positive. Very likely, most space officers coming from the Air Force have experienced some ribbing about some science fiction space series. Netflix’s “Space Force,” for example, was an ambivalent introduction of the public to a Space Force trying to define itself. The leadership of the Space Force has tried hard to distinguish itself from visions that diverge too far from its current and historical operations, going out of its way to throw cold water on any future manned space operations.

Rather than see the linkage as building the cultural support for its mission, programs and recruiting, conservative-minded Space Force leaders may see the question of rank as accelerating public misperceptions of the service’s role and generating unrealistic expectations to which the service will be held accountable.

Finally, and most importantly, symbols matter. The Space Force knows that with an embrace of naval rank comes expectations of naval roles. But does the Space Force want its officers to embrace navalist thinking? Although virtually all major space power theorists have consistently used maritime analogies, space power theory wasn’t part of military education until quite recently, and has yet to make it into official doctrine.

Culturally, the Space Force leadership was raised in an environment where social standing and kudos went to the “warfighters”: fighter pilots and those who could produce effects on the ground. The result is that, while a small navalist cultural tradition in the Space Force and its precursor does exist, it is not widespread and confined mostly to its intellectuals.

In short, the forces of the *status quo* are strong. Cultures and bureaucracies tend to reproduce themselves. It is these combined inertias, of identity, of culture, and of institutions which have thus far prevented the Space Force from embracing the larger purposes for which it was designed. They are liable to play out in the current debate about rank facing America's newest military branch as well.

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