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Publisher Routledge

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## Geopolitics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713635150>

### Space and the Atom: On the Popular Geopolitics of Cold War Rocketry

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Online Publication Date: 01 October 2008

**To cite this Article** Macdonald, Fraser(2008)'Space and the Atom: On the Popular Geopolitics of Cold War Rocketry',*Geopolitics*,13:4,611 — 634

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/14650040802275479

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14650040802275479>

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## Space and the Atom: On the Popular Geopolitics of Cold War Rocketry

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*This paper considers the imbricated domains of space exploration and Cold War geopolitics by following the trajectory of the ‘Corporal’, the world’s first guided missile authorised to carry a nuclear warhead. It examines the popular geopolitics of rocketry as both a technology of mass destruction and as a vehicle for the transcendent dreams of extra-terrestrial discovery. Avoiding both technical and statist accounts, the paper shows how these technologies of Cold War strategic advantage were activated and sustained through popular media and everyday experience. Particular attention is given to such mundane activities as children’s play, citing the example of die-cast miniature toys of the Corporal. Through such apparently modest means, nuclear weapons were made intelligible in, and transposable to, a domestic context. The paper is also situated within a wider emerging literature on geographies and geopolitics of outer space.*

### INTRODUCTION

This is an essay about, among other things, heavenly visions and hellish anxieties. It is about the geopolitics of space exploration caught, as it was, between the pragmatic exigencies of the Cold War and loftier ideals about transcending our Earthly home. My aim is to contribute to an emerging interest in extra-terrestrial geographies by examining the place of rocketry within the cultural, political and geopolitical frames of the era. Until very recently, geographers in particular have been reluctant to move their ‘graphy’

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beyond the limits of the 'geo'. A geography of outer space might sound like a quixotic enterprise though it is towards this over-ambitious end that the essay is in part directed. To consider the geopolitics of space inevitably raises an obvious question about the applicability of a 'geo'-politics to the celestial realm. Everett Dolman has already projected classical geopolitics into space under the guise of 'astropolitics' but this is not the model that I follow here.<sup>1</sup> While there is much work to be done forging a critical astropolitics which can examine the contested governance and sovereignty of space, this paper is only obliquely concerned with astropolitical dominance. I want instead to think through the parallel geopolitics of space exploration and Cold War weaponry with reference to some resolutely grounded observations about the place of such technology in everyday civilian life here on Earth. More specifically, I want to think about how the geopolitics of space exploration was expressed, and indeed enacted, through 'play'. If this seems like an unlikely approach, it is nevertheless insistent about taking seriously the ludic activities of children and adults as a matter of geopolitical import.

In what follows, I step back from what is conventionally regarded as the inception of the Space Age: the dramatic launch of the Russian satellite *Sputnik* into a stable orbit on 4 October 1957. There is no question that *Sputnik* is the pre-eminent milestone in the history of the space race.<sup>2</sup> It is significant for all sorts of reasons, not least as the first in a technological lineage that would subsequently bequeath profound consequences for the nature of social life on Earth, from weather forecasting to telephony to surveillance to navigation to missile guidance and so on. *Sputnik* will doubtless remain an iconic marker of Cold War rivalry. But even before a payload could be placed in orbit, the rival superpowers faced the earlier challenge, which interests me here, of leaving Earth's atmosphere in the first place.

My concern then is with the evolving rocket programme of the American military from the end of the Second World War to the early 1960s. While this study includes a number of different rockets, intended for a variety of strategic, military and research purposes, I concentrate in particular on the development of the 'Corporal' (Figure 1), an overlooked part of a wider programme which takes in its technical variants (such as the WAC Corporal) and immediate predecessors (such as the V-2, and the Bumper WAC). If I use the word 'rocket' in this context with some hesitation, it is because the word most frequently appended to the name Corporal is 'missile'.<sup>3</sup> The distinction seems a fine one, but in a sense the entire history of space exploration lies in this slippage between rocket and missile; between a peace-time research vehicle and a Cold War weapon of mass destruction. There is nothing, technically speaking, to differentiate rocket from missile. The terms are often used interchangeably, even if they each carry a different semiotic payload. Rocket is a fairly benign descriptor that simply refers to a vehicle which obtains thrust by the ejection of a fast-moving propellant.



**FIGURE 1** US Army training with the Corporal missile, 1954. Reproduced courtesy of Army Ballistic Missile Agency, Redstone Arsenal, Alabama.

This is the term most obviously associated with exploration. Missile, by contrast, implies impact and annihilation; an intent to destroy. While this different discursive construction of the technology is worth noting, the vehicle itself is exactly the same: space exploration and perpetual readiness for nuclear war are simply two parts of one story. The Corporal programme is therefore the classic embodiment of these seemingly irreconcilable objectives, for it has the acclaim of being the first man-made object to ascend to outer space as well as being America's (and Britain's) first nuclear missile. It was, as David de Vorkin described the V-2, a tool of science that would prepare the nation for the next war, with both 'warhead' and 'peacehead' applications.<sup>4</sup>

The Corporal missile has curiously escaped any detailed consideration either by historians of the space age or those of nuclearism.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, it was not the first significant rocket (that notoriety must go to its direct predecessor, the German V-2), nor was it the first nuclear weapon (the free-fall bomb 'Little Boy' whose accomplishment was the mass killing of 140,000 civilians in Hiroshima). The Corporal, being a 'tactical missile' with a modest range of 75 nautical miles, was also of limited strategic significance compared to subsequent Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), like the

more versatile 'Atlas', which could usefully dispatch death to remote peoples as well as place satellites into orbit. While the Corporal was briefly on the front line of nuclear defence, it was never used in conflict. This is perhaps just as well; in the early years, the Corporal had such a terrible record of target accuracy that its most likely casualties would have been its own troop battalions. It was, if anything, a bit of a dud. It was also however the first man-made object to leave the Earth's atmosphere.<sup>6</sup> And as the first guided missile authorised to carry a nuclear warhead, it arguably has particular significance as the progenitor of contemporary weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, at the time of its development it carried, however fleetingly, a raft of hopes and fears both about the space age and about nuclear war.

What interests me here is what we might call the 'cultural success' of the Corporal, an object that sat astride the categories of 'rocket' and 'missile', drawing on the popular enthusiasm for space to legitimate its underlying military purpose. In this essay then, I discuss the place of the Corporal within the popular and political cultures of the era and in so doing I pay most attention to the ways in which the missile was figured across a diverse suite of cultural forms. I situate my argument within a wider literature on 'popular geopolitics', a recent emphasis within critical geopolitics that attends to the circulation of geopolitical power through popular culture rather than through familiar networks of statesmen, generals and ruling elites. To talk, therefore, of the 'popular geopolitics' of rocketry is to examine how the technologies of Cold War strategic advantage were activated and sustained through popular media and everyday experience. The essay argues that the power of the Corporal lay less in its technical ability to propel a 20 kiloton nuclear fission warhead 40 km high than in its presence as a flexible narrative prop, able to support popular enthusiasms about space while coyly doubling as a weapon of mass destruction. That the Corporal was 'domesticated' as a die cast children's toy is, I argue, indicative of how the widespread enthusiasm for rocketry and space exploration in the 1950s eased nuclear weapons into the political mainstream.

In the first instance, I open up space and its exploration as a research theme which could usefully be considered within the orbit of geography. Drawing on earlier precedents for thinking of space as a sphere of the social, I emphasise the strategic, scientific and geopolitical continuities between space exploration and earlier episodes of imperial endeavour. The history of the Corporal programme is then understood in this light, as a technology variously configured as vehicle, instrument and projectile, that emerged from the aftermath of the Second World War to become a key weapon in NATO's arsenal. Lastly, I want to think more closely about the popular geopolitics of the Corporal programme, examining the by no means untroubled passage of the missile through domestic as well state contexts.

## TOWARDS A HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE OUTER EARTH

An historical geography of space exploration has yet to be written. And such a task might only be one part of a broader geographical engagement with outer space which has, to date, been strangely limited. Strange, because it is now over fifty years since humans first cast their instruments into orbit. Our species has lived in space for more or less the last twenty years, and is currently represented by the crew of the International Space Station. The journey through the Earth's atmosphere, once a major obstacle, is now made on an almost weekly basis. There are over 700 operational spacecraft in orbit and over 35 nations now have payloads in space. In short, the last fifty years has seen the outer-Earth become an ordinary and accessible sphere of human endeavour, our presence in (and reliance on) space making it one of the enabling conditions for our current mode of everyday life. It would be easy to draw a rather superficial connection here, trading on the commodious meaning of the word 'space' as both the primary analytic for contemporary human geography and as the popular term for the expanse in which solar and stellar systems are located. But I want, in passing, to make the more ambitious argument that geography is the obvious disciplinary home for the study of the historical, cultural, political, economic and strategic contest over the outer-Earth. Such a project is not a search for the new, but rather a boldly going *back* to some of geography's earlier origins. For if outer space is a scale that for the most part feels unfamiliar to human geographers, such limited disciplinary horizons are, paradoxically, a late modern tendency. David Livingstone has shown how, in figures like the sixteenth-century scholar-mathematician John Dee (1527–1608), astronomical enquiry and the study of cosmography aimed to connect the workings of heaven and earth.<sup>7</sup> It was the planetary scale which formed the background to much geographical teaching in the early modern period, the movements of the stars being afforded significance in the outcome of worldly affairs. As I have explored elsewhere, there are a number of geographical precedents for thinking about outer space.<sup>8</sup>

A related argument worth mentioning is that a geography of outer space is a logical extension of earlier geographies of imperial exploration.<sup>9</sup> Space exploration has used exactly the same discourses, the same rationales, and even the same institutional frameworks (such as the International Geophysical Year, 1957–1958) as terrestrial exploration. And like its terrestrial counterpart, the move into space has its origins in older imperial enterprises. Marina Benjamin argues that for the United States outer space was 'always a metaphorical extension of the American West'.<sup>10</sup> When Frederick Jackson Turner argued in 1893 that the frontier was central to American identity and nationhood, his thesis could equally be applied to the US space programme's encounter with the 'final frontier' in the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Peter Redfield makes a similar point in relation to the French Arianne space programme

which relied on its earlier colonial ties to take advantage of the fuel economies associated with an equatorial launch, rather than sites at higher latitudes. Looking at the parallel narratives of colonialism and rocketry in French Guiana, he makes the case that 'outer space reflects a practical shadow of empire'.<sup>12</sup>

The history of the Corporal missile also stands in this shadow. Not only was the Corporal (configured as sounding rocket) part of a bid to open up the new empire of space on the part of the United States, but the Corporal (configured as missile) was also a means of shoring up imperial power back on Earth. When the British government bought the programme from the United States in 1954 it was purchased as means of re-asserting Britain's geopolitical significance in the context of its own imperial anxieties.<sup>13</sup> Possessing a nuclear missile was seen by Winston Churchill as a shortcut back to the international stage at a time when Britain's own home-grown missile programme was in its infancy.<sup>14</sup> In this way, did the imperative of space exploration go hand in hand with terrestrial geostrategic considerations, both of which were extensions of earlier regimes of imperial power. Even if the political geography literature has scarcely engaged with outer space, we can conceive the advent of rocketry as one expression of Cold War (imperial) geopolitics. All of this is to say, then, that a geography of space and its exploration, both in terms of its historical development and its contemporary astropolitics, is not some far-fetched or indulgent distraction from the 'real world'; rather, it is constitutive of numerous familiar operations, from international relations and the conduct of war, to the basic infrastructural maintenance of the state and to the lives of its citizenry.<sup>15</sup> Space, and how we got there, matters. And this is true not least because thinking about space and its exploration presents a series of challenges to the terrestrial character of geography itself, as well perhaps, as testing some of the basic tenets of social theory.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the ability to leave the atmosphere has profoundly refocused attention on the geographical knowledge of Earth itself; in all sorts of ways, then, attaining orbit has helped remake Earthly geographies.<sup>17</sup> I consider the Corporal programme to be a useful starting point for considering many of these themes. And yet what is ultimately most interesting for our purposes here is to think about how this early unmanned space exploration engaged the popular imagination in ways that legitimated and sustained particular geopolitical logics here on Earth.

### 'BULLETS WITH BRAINS': THE CORPORAL AS PEACETIME RESEARCH VEHICLE AND WEAPON OF MASS DESTRUCTION

The story of CORPORAL's birth, growth and development into a full-fledged guided missile system is one of trial and error, a pattern of devoted human endeavour studded with many failures and fewer heartening

successes, acknowledging each failure and profiting from it, and striving towards the goal of providing the Army Field Forces with an efficient deterrent to aggression. The story is one of improvisations, of making do with what was available in materials and components, of feeling the way as explorers into the unknown, uncharted realm of rocketry.<sup>18</sup>

In recounting the history of the Corporal, one must first deal with its name. Why 'Corporal'? It was a question of rank. In 1944, the US Army had commissioned a new missile programme from a rocketry team at what became the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) at the California Institute of Technology.<sup>19</sup> Their first attempt was a primitive test vehicle called 'Private', a simple unguided ballistic missile which was launched in December 1944. As JPL engineer William H. Pickering recalled in an interview, 'When we started out, we said first of all we'd do Private, then we'd do the Corporal, and then we'd do Sergeant, and maybe get up to the General'. Laughing at this point, he added: 'We had the WAC Corporal too – Women's Army Corps . . . it was a little one [more laughter]'.<sup>20</sup> This was a regular little gag among rocket scientists. More accurately, WAC stood for 'Without Attitude Control', a reference to the fact that this simple prototype of a research-based sounding rocket had no stabilisation and guidance system.<sup>21</sup> But 'Women's Army Corps' fitted rather well with the unmistakably gendered assumptions about the (low ranking) place of women in the military and, indeed, about the perceived 'modesty' of this particular rocket. In due course, it was succeeded by the apparently more mature 'Corporal' proper and eventually by the 'Sergeant', both of which were authorised to carry nuclear warheads. But for all these deprecating remarks, the WAC Corporal was a crucial interim stage in the history of rocketry, for many years holding the record, when combined with the V-2, for the highest altitude ever attained by human technology. This combined 'BUMPER WAC Corporal' – so called because the V-2 would give a 'bump' to the WAC Corporal allowing it to *start* its journey from a high-altitude platform – was the world's first two-stage liquid propellant rocket, and became after several attempts in 1948 and 1949, the first man-made object to reach space.

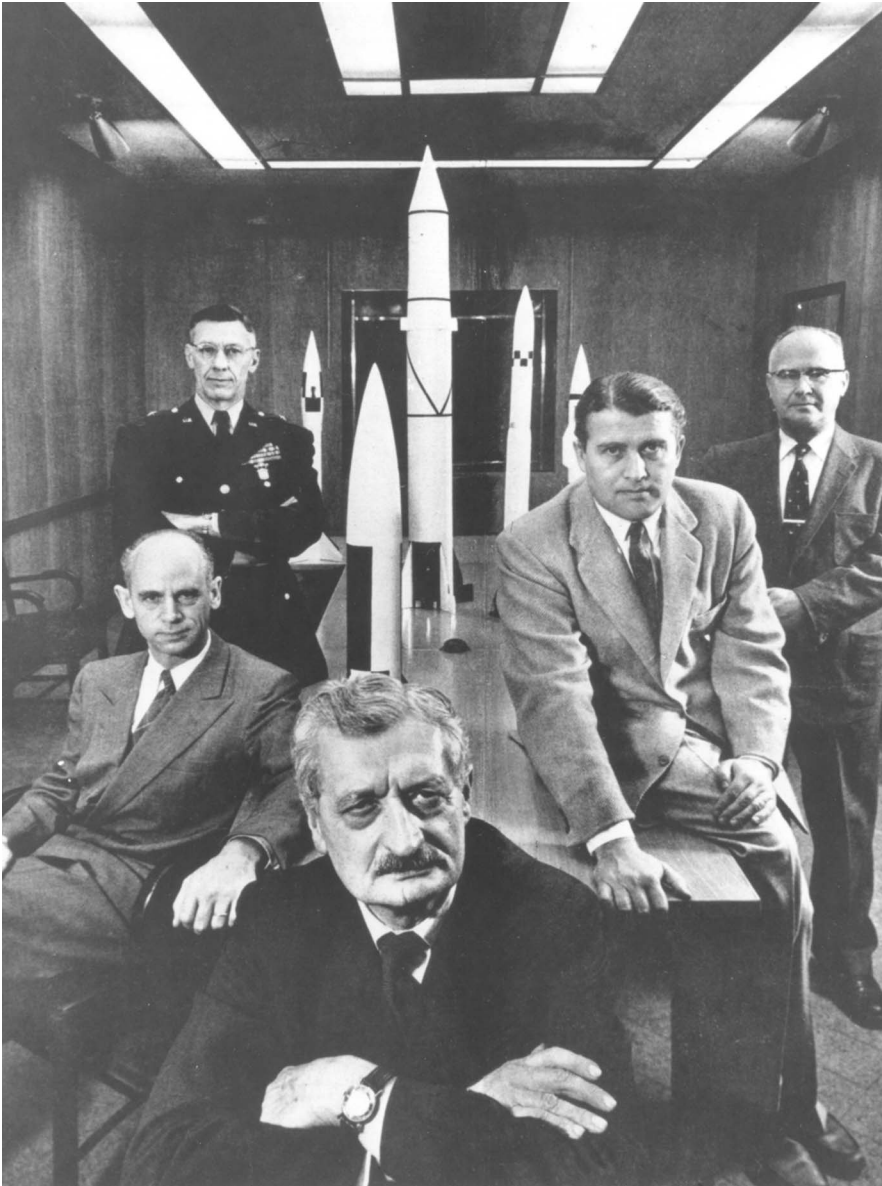
This 'mating' with the V-2 was essential in establishing rocket 'staging' as a viable means of high altitude ascent. But to see the home-grown Corporal atop the V-2 provides an appropriate metaphor for the subsequent development of the US space programme: American strategic initiatives given a 'bump' by German engineering. For it was German rocket engineers, led by the inimitable Werner von Braun, who developed the V-2 ('Vergeltungswaffe 2' or 'Reprisal Weapon 2', as Joseph Goebbels called it). As the world's first ballistic missile, it rained terror on London and Antwerp in the last desperate phase of the Second World War. Although 2700 civilians were killed and thousands more were injured, it was the morale-sapping psychological effects of the V-2 that stand out. Unlike other weapons, its arrival



went unheralded by engine noise or sirens. It accomplished terror by travelling in complete silence and at supersonic speed. There was no warning, just instant destruction. Nor was there any defence against V-2 attack. Unsurprisingly, when the end of the war came, rival military commanders were desperate to get hold of the weapon leading to a scramble among the Allies for access to V-2 equipment and personnel. Only then did the full scale of the V-2 production and its reliance upon slavery become clear: a concentration camp at Mittelbau-Dora had been established – effectively an extension of the infamous Buchenwald – in order to provide labour for the construction of the V-2.<sup>22</sup> In the eighteen months of production, an estimated 20,000 people died: mass destruction was therefore the ancillary outcome of rocketry even from its inception, quite aside from its intended military impact.<sup>23</sup>

The American success in acquiring the V-2 was principally achieved through the auspices of Operation Paperclip,<sup>24</sup> an audacious programme which, under the leadership of Col. Holger N. Toftoy, brought over 100 German scientists and engineers over to the US, many of whom were put to work initially at the White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico and then at the Redstone Arsenal at Huntsville, Alabama. Foremost among these was von Braun who eventually recruited his old mentor on the V-2, Hermann Oberth, whose book *By Rocket to Planetary Space*, published in 1923, is regarded as one of the founding documents of the Space Age (see Figure 2). In acquiring von Braun, the Americans had not just captured an uncommon technical expertise and his undoubted skills as an engineering manager; unbeknownst to them, they had also enlisted the greatest popular advocate for space exploration as well as a doughty champion of maintaining nuclear weapons in space. Von Braun as celebrity boffin went on to bring both the promise and the reality of space exploration into every household in America via his regular TV shows, popular magazine articles and a close partnership with Walt Disney. While he was not the only 'Paperclip' émigré to popularise Cold War hardware – Heinz Haber was also influential in this respect, starring in Walt Disney's nuclear propagandist cartoon *Our Friend the Atom* – von Braun was unusual in combining high profile advocacy with hands-on engineering.

Von Braun's V-2 was a gift to the nascent American space programme. Although not an especially versatile weapon of war, the enormous German investment necessary to develop the science of viable propulsion suddenly became available for a new era of space technology. In the vapour trails of Operation Paperclip, the WAC Corporal was quickly overtaken by the success of the V-2 for high altitude flights. With over one hundred V-2s available for research purposes,<sup>25</sup> it soon established itself as indispensable for the study of near-Earth space phenomena. In one sense, it was the perfect research vehicle as the weight lost by the removal of the German warhead could be usefully replaced with scientific instrumentation, or, as happened in 1946,



**FIGURE 2** Officials of the Army Ballistic Missile Agency with model US rockets, Alabama, 1956. Pictured from left to right, Ernst Stuhlinger, Major General Holger Toftoy, Hermann Oberth, Wernher von Braun, and Robert Lusser. The Corporal missile is the second model from the right; the V-2 is closest to the camera. Image reproduced courtesy of NASA.

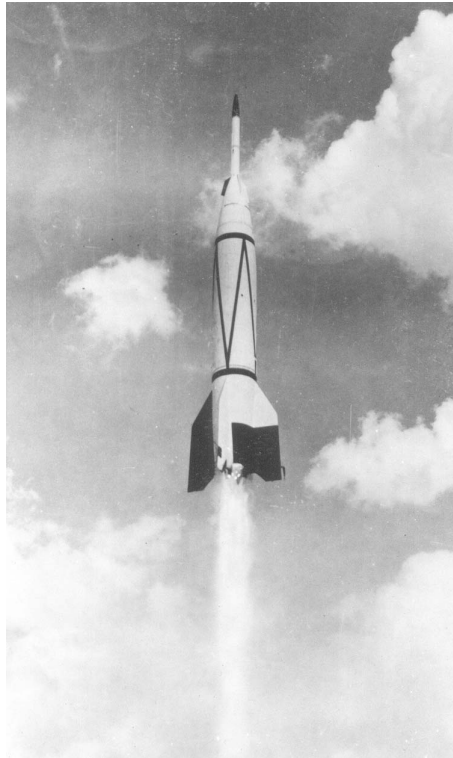
with camera equipment. And on 24 October 1946, launch number 13 produced the first pictures of the Earth from space. Writing in the *National Geographic*, the camera's engineer, Clyde Holliday, claimed that these were the first pictures to show the curvature of the Earth 'from the border of

outer space', with 'single views cover[ing] 100,000 square miles'.<sup>26</sup> Holliday identifies the profound implications of this episode:

Results are now pointing to a time when cameras may be mounted on guided missiles for scouting enemy territory in war, mapping inaccessible regions of the earth in peacetime, and even photographing cloud formations, storm fronts, and overcast areas over an entire continent in a few hours, which would be of great benefit to weather forecasters.<sup>27</sup>

It could, he thought, even 'detect troop movements': 'camouflage would hide little from such an all seeing eye'.<sup>28</sup> Reaching the heights of the upper atmosphere with his camera allowed Holliday to anticipate the new horizons that would ultimately be opened up by satellite technology. Two and a half years after Holliday's film, on 24 February 1949, the BUMPER WAC broke all records attaining a speed of 5,150 miles per hour and an altitude of about 244 miles (see Figure 3). The excitement of this event was not confined to von Braun, its principal engineer. Footage from these BUMPER flights inevitably generated a modest degree of public interest. To see the Earth receding at high speed gave an altogether more tangible sense of the possibility of space travel. In 1956, Michael Todd's film version of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* opened with a Corporal being launched at the White Sands Missile range, followed by footage from the rocket. It was an early taste of rocketry's accelerated sublime.

Rocketry, however, was not straightforwardly about space exploration. The refinement of guidance systems – initially through the Corporal 'E' test vehicle – had very obvious applications for warfare. John E. Dahlquist, Commanding General of the US Army in the 1950s, argued that 'guided missiles, especially when atomic armed, represent the most radical change in weapons systems since the invention of gunpowder'.<sup>29</sup> They were, he said, 'bullets with brains'. The Corporal was the first vehicle to warrant this description, being the first missile authorised to carry an atomic warhead. The Corporal in effect became the earliest nuclear missile, shifting from an experimental vehicle to a practical field weapon. The context for this transition was a wider set of geopolitical maneuvers that had seen America's troop commitment scaled down from their expensive wartime heights while at the same time anticipating a new era of Cold War conflicts. The first successful Soviet nuclear test in 1949 prompted the Army Ordinance to ask the JPL to 'weaponise' their WAC Corporal research rocket as a tactical surface-to-surface guided missile.<sup>30</sup> The outbreak of the Korean War gave further impetus to the production process, though they would not be combat ready in time for deployment there. By the mid 1950s, President Eisenhower's 'New Look' policy had replaced conventional defence doctrine with an



**FIGURE 3** The Bumper WAC becomes the first man-made object to penetrate outer space, launched from the White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 1949. Image reproduced courtesy of NASA.

approach that simultaneously promised ‘massive nuclear retaliation’ while making peace with the Soviet Union and protecting America’s economy. For the US, like the UK, a compromise had to be found between a policy of massive nuclear retaliation and the doctrine of a ‘flexible response’, which might include the deployment of conventional forces as well as small-scale ‘tactical’ nuclear weapons. The changing security environment in Eastern Europe meant that the American policy, and that of NATO more broadly, was geared to the possibility of fighting a ‘limited’ nuclear war using lower yield tactical weapons such as the Corporal. To the extent that the Corporal had escaped widespread public acclaim in relation to the Bumper WAC high altitude flights, it had, by the late 1950s, acquired an entirely new public profile as the front line of missile defence.

Although reconfigured as a field weapon, the Corporal always retained the cumbersome handling of a research vehicle, rather than the versatility required by the Army at war. A single test firing required a battalion of 250 men

equipped with 35 vehicles working 7–9 hours to complete preparation for launch in a process that involved handling liquid fuel and an extremely hazardous oxidant, red fuming nitrous oxide (RFNA). Until 1955, its in-flight reliability and accuracy was less than 50 percent, with only modest improvements in this record thereafter.<sup>31</sup> So the power of the missile lay less in its potential for destruction (though this was still considerable – the war-head was significantly more powerful than that dropped on Hiroshima) but rather in its status as a monument: as a symbol of power to be seen alike by American citizen and rival sovereign states. The Corporal had a monumental presence in a whole range of public contexts, from a life-size model for use as an Army recruiting prop<sup>32</sup> to being pictured, as we shall see, in collectors cards in breakfast cereals. The US Army even used a couple of unarmed Corporals to augment the red carpet at the Munich premiere of Wernher von Braun's pompous biopic flop *I Aim At the Stars* (which the Jewish comedian Mort Sahl acerbically subtitled *But Sometimes I Hit London*).<sup>33</sup> It is in this context, then, that it seems appropriate to examine the popular geopolitics of the Corporal.

### THE POPULAR GEOPOLITICS OF ROCKETRY

Geopolitics is not what it used to be; it is not, at least, *conceived* as it used to be. The critical geopolitics agenda, so formatively inaugurated by Simon Dalby and Gearóid Ó Tuathail in the 1990s,<sup>34</sup> has since broadened the terms of its inquiry, responding to criticism that it had reproduced the narrow focus of classical geopolitics on the state and its governing intellectual and political elites of ministers, generals and tacticians.<sup>35</sup> New work on popular geopolitics has sought to redress this balance by looking at how geopolitical power is circulated in and through popular culture, 'ordinary experience' and everyday life.<sup>36</sup> A few researchers are taking up Nigel Thrift's injunction to attend to how 'the little things' – like the object world, the human body and even words as ordinary as the definite article – matter in the operation of statecraft.<sup>37</sup> This sort of approach is particularly instructive for thinking about Cold War militarism and space exploration, for in both cases these were sustained by popular movements and enacted through such mundane activities like child's play. Moreover, it is also a useful corrective not only to the state-dominated field of geopolitics but also to the no less state-dominated histories of nuclearism.<sup>38</sup> Much attention has already been directed at the impact of nuclearism on popular literary cultures.<sup>39</sup> John Canaday, for instance, has persuasively argued that 'nuclear weapons have exercised their power in the purely literary form of their fictional use in the future'.<sup>40</sup> But it is worth reiterating an important distinction here, that this is not merely a matter of *representing* the geopolitical power of nuclear weapons through fiction, but that this *is* the power of nuclear weapons: we are dealing

with the effect (rather than the referent) of representation.<sup>41</sup> A similar point might be made in relation to space exploration which has its earliest origins in literary flights of fancy. Popular culture cannot be understood as 'responding' to space exploration as much as being constitutive of it.<sup>42</sup>

All of this supports my argument that popular geopolitics is a suitable perspective from which to think about Cold War rocketry. At the same time, however, I want to avoid some of the more obvious cultural arenas – television, film and literature – in which rocketry has been popularly figured. The Corporal has featured as a narrative prop in all manner of screen and literary contexts, perhaps most famously in Ian Fleming's *Goldfinger*, in which the villain's plan to contaminate the gold reserves of Fort Knox with a stolen Corporal warhead is foiled by the deft (though decidedly straight) maneuvers of 007 and Pussy Galore.<sup>43</sup> But I am a little wary that much of the popular geopolitics literature has settled on film<sup>44</sup> which, while resolutely popular, is hardly in the spirit of the 'little thing' (quite aside, of course, from the embeddedness of Hollywood within wider state-corporate-military networks). Instead, I want to concentrate on more ephemeral cultural presences of the Corporal, in order to think about how the geopolitics of militarism and space exploration were enacted in everyday contexts. And in a further departure from the mainstream of popular geopolitics I want to foreground, as far as I am able, the role of mundane social practices working in and through artefacts and representations. I am interested in the geopolitics of two practices in particular, play and collecting, which are in turn examined through the representational forms of toys and cards.

### Rocketry as Child's Play

It has never been clear to me why the perennially stupid question *what do you want to be when you grow up?* often anticipates an answer like 'astronaut'. Arguably, the astronaut is the postwar version of the polar explorer, embodying certain qualities and virtues that adults would like to instill in their children. And yet for children too, space and its exploration have been fertile imaginative resources, even before the advent of rocketry. This last point is important. Play is the *precursor* to space exploration: it would be impossible to separate the serious business of rocketry from various forms of tinkering and toying with the (im)practicalities of propulsion. Hermann Oberth, one of the founders of rocket science, pictured in Figure 1, was known to have developed his expertise out of childhood play having been fascinated with Jules Verne from the age of eleven. The same also applies to war games; playing at or with war is a constituent part of warfare itself.<sup>45</sup> So it should not be surprising that a technology like rocketry – doubling as vehicle of space exploration and weapon of mass destruction – would be such a prominent narrative prop in children's play in the 1950s. While there were doubtless many instances of rocketry featuring in play without any

bespoke toy to facilitate the imagination, I want to think here about some specific forms of toy missile and the games they might have evoked. It is striking that there were very deliberate attempts to reproduce missile technology for the playroom and thus to translate the hardware of nuclear destruction and its wider geopolitical narrative into a domestic setting. My approach, then, is to take seriously the ludic activities of children, and indeed adults, as a suitable subject for geopolitical enquiry. While this project follows some recent attempts to re-think the status of children in political geography,<sup>46</sup> it is less aligned with the 'children's geographies' literature<sup>47</sup> than with a distinct concern with play and its cultural significance.<sup>48</sup>

In a recent paper, Nigel Thrift has examined the rise of the 'supertoy', a term borrowed from a short story by Brian Aldiss, by which he refers to a new generation of plaything, such as the *Tamagotchi*, that, as an assemblage of hardware and software, can 'intelligently' interact with its environment and users.<sup>49</sup> Thrift is interested in the toy as a form whose character is changing in ways that might reconfigure the sociality of its users. When talking about 'supertoys', it seems unlikely however that Thrift could have been aware of Dinky's series of 1950s die-cast models with exactly the same name. But his claim that 'the course of interactivity has nearly always been prefigured by the history of toys', seems to me an important one which would bear consideration in relation to the Dinky Supertoy.<sup>50</sup> The idea of 'interactivity' in my example is rather different from Thrift's, but there are some interesting points of connection nonetheless.

The Dinky Supertoy no. 666 – a Missile erector vehicle with Corporal missile and launching platform – was first advertised on the back page of *Meccano Magazine* in November 1959 (Figure 4). Inside the magazine, in an article called 'Dinky Toy News' by 'The Toyman', the reader is told that 'this fine new item is going to be one of the most sought for [sic] and popular of all the many fine Dinky Supertoys already available'.<sup>51</sup> It was, explained The Toyman, 'an accurately modeled miniature of Britain's famous guided weapon' and 'a working model that has lots of play value, for the rocket itself can be loaded on to its launching platform and fired in a realistic manner'. 'Britain's famous guided weapon' was a truth of sorts. Britain had bought the Corporal programme from the US in 1954, and after building a firing range on the islands of South Uist and Benbecula in Scotland's Outer Hebrides, it had tested the first of their 113 missiles in June 1959.<sup>52</sup> The launch of the toy missile therefore coincided, as the advert itself implies, with the public interest in the Hebridean debut of the Corporal. It was, in other words, a momento of a notable event in household and nation alike. While there is no evidence that the British Army authorised this specific model, in subsequent instances – Corgi's 'Corporal' model, for instance – the Army allowed the toy company's draughtsmen access to the real thing for the sake of accuracy.<sup>53</sup> In this way, then, the toys are licensed correlates that encourage an interest in and support for the original hardware in its

It's **NEW** .. it "fires"

*The Corporal Missile . . .  
a rocket you can launch*

**DINKY SUPERTOYS No. 666 MISSILE ERECTOR  
VEHICLE WITH CORPORAL MISSILE AND  
LAUNCHING PLATFORM**

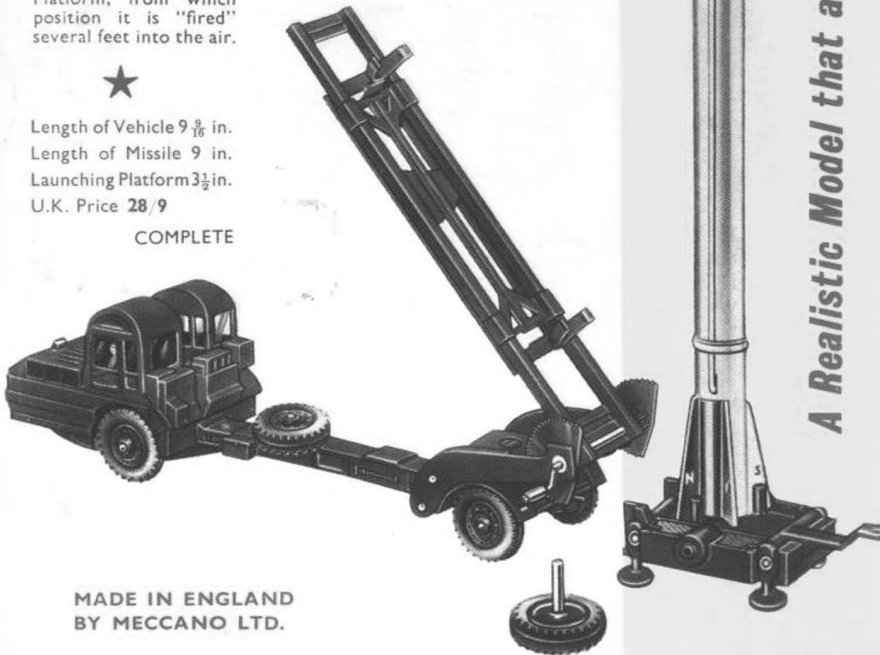
As recently as June 1959 the first guided weapon to be used by the British Army was launched in the Hebrides. It was the "Corporal" missile 45 ft. in length. Now, only a few weeks later, a Dinky Supertoys replica of the Corporal Missile Unit is available. It is a working model too! Time and time again, this Dinky Supertoys rocket (which is spring loaded) can be launched from its platform in a realistic manner. This is a most exciting model, because it actually WORKS.

The Missile is moulded in Nylon, with a harmless soft hollow rubber nose cone to ensure safety. Both the Erector Vehicle and the Launching Platform are die-cast in solid metal. The Erector Vehicle is fitted with gearing which enables the boom to pick up the Missile and swing it to the horizontal travelling position. Then, at the firing point, the boom is operated to raise the Missile vertically on to the Launching Platform, from which position it is "fired" several feet into the air.



Length of Vehicle  $9\frac{1}{8}$  in.  
Length of Missile 9 in.  
Launching Platform  $3\frac{1}{2}$  in.  
U.K. Price 28/9

COMPLETE



MADE IN ENGLAND  
BY MECCANO LTD.

★ Here are some interesting details about the actual Corporal Missile:

Length 45 ft. 6 in.  
Diameter 2 ft. 6 in.  
Span of fins 7 ft.  
Firing weight 12,000 lb.  
Range 75 to 100 miles  
Guidance: Radio command and Radar

**A Realistic Model that actually WORKS**

**FIGURE 4** Advert for Dinky Supertoy no. 666, Missile erector vehicle with Corporal missile and launching platform, as it appeared in *Meccano Magazine*, November 1959.



strategic context. The awkwardness of this being an American missile is glossed over, the advert proudly claiming that the toy is 'Made in England'.

The advert goes on to emphasise agency and control: this is 'the Corporal missile . . . a rocket *you* can launch'; 'a realistic model that actually WORKS; 'it's new, it fires'. The toy could be finely manipulated by its child operative, even to the extent of gearing that enabled 'the boom to pick up the missile and swing it to the horizontal traveling position'. In this way, the work of 250 men, 35 vehicles and 9 hours could be accomplished by a child in a few seconds. It is the event of launch in miniature form. The launch event is integral to the toy; it is part, but by no means all, of its purpose. It achieves a particular experience of time and space, a series of anticipatory preparations followed by a countdown and the moment of launch in which the exact timing and target are established by the player through the symbolic manipulation of the object. The launch works as play in part because it successfully addresses what child psychiatrists John and Elizabeth Newson have called its 'happening-hunger'.<sup>54</sup> As Dan Fleming notes

children need things to happen and are impatient with the adult temper which, from time to time, simply wants things to stop happening. Many things can count as happenings, and in fact playing becomes a way of generating happenings when none are forthcoming from other sources.<sup>55</sup>

Children thus become geopolitical agents through their mastery of the missile event. And, characteristically, it must be repeated over and over again. Walter Benjamin recognised that 'repetition is the soul of play, that nothing gives . . . [the child] greater pleasure than to 'Do it again!'"<sup>56</sup> For Benjamin, it is a way of overcoming frightening fundamental experiences. But what exactly is being repeated? Is this a rocket or a missile, a weapon or a vehicle? Is this about war or peace, space exploration or the Cold War defence of capitalism? Or something else altogether? It is all of these things, of course; the toy is propelled by the ambiguity. Toy theorists like Brian Sutton-Smith have constantly emphasised that toys do not come with overdetermined meanings: they do not dictate play but rather 'the plans of the playful imagination dominate . . . the toys, not the other way round'.<sup>57</sup> However, as Dan Fleming argues, this endless liminality of the toy is perhaps 'more in the eye of the critic-analyst than in the reality and materiality of a culture which appears rather more ruthless than this at deciding how things are'.<sup>58</sup>

When first introduced, both the Dinky missile and its Corgi rival were relatively open to being either weapon or space vehicle. The Corgi model in particular was marketed as part of its 'Rocket Age' series. But by 1961, it had tilted the meaning of the Corporal by introducing a 'percussion warhead' (model no. 1480) to be bought separately and 'easily and quickly fitted to your missile . . . loaded with standard caps to give a really authentic explosion on impact'. The centrality of the launch had thus shifted to that of

impact. This change in emphasis raises the question of the extent to which the geographies of Cold War missile pointing were part of the cultural meaning that the toy embodied.<sup>59</sup> Between launch and impact, there is, of course, a vector of direction. But there is little to suggest a specific eastward orientation to these lines of flight, though one might argue that this is assumed by the Cold War context. It is safer only to suggest that the missile is pointed 'away' from 'us'.

In Dinky's advert, details of the toy (with 'a harmless soft hollow rubber nose cone to ensure safety') are placed alongside details of the 'real' missile, though the advert is shy of noting its nuclear capability. In other respects, absolute fidelity to the original is important. As a scale model, the detail included in the miniature was considered to be essential. It was, after all, a competitive marketplace. The early Dinky versions of the 666 vehicle had neither windows nor driver, but both had to be introduced to respond to the rival Corgi's toy, advertised with the slogan 'Corgi – the one with windows'.<sup>60</sup> This sluggish attention to detail across Dinky's range was fatal for its market share and by the time the Corporal was withdrawn, it was in serious financial difficulties. But what does this level of detail mean? Fleming refers to the toy's degree of representational accuracy and realism as its 'modality' which runs alongside (sometimes in competition with) its mechanical activity.<sup>61</sup> The basic 'toyiness' of the Corporal is achieved through miniaturisation, which in turn allows the operative a sense of control and superiority. But detail must still be preserved; it must be 'real enough', not least because the toymaker must satisfy some degree of technical knowledge on the part of the player. Toys like this both assume and impart serious technical competence, not only in terms of fine motor skills but also as an analogue of 'real' military field knowledge. Indeed, the full slippage between the worlds of play and of war are nowhere more apparent than elsewhere in the same issue of *Meccano Magazine* where other adverts by the Army and the Royal Navy encourage boys of 14 to leave school and join up as a trade apprentice. The child-consumer that one day purchases a toy might the next day decide to enlist. There is no doubt other than that these toys assume the meta-context of the Cold War. In Thrift's description of the highly 'mediatized' contemporary supertoy, he notes that 'from *My Little Pony* to *Barbie*, the worlds on offer are a series of micro-ontologies which children can link into'.<sup>62</sup> But in the case of the 1950s Supertoy, the context was quite different: while the child might use the missile as part of a wider set of military toys, it was still within the narrative parameters of Cold War conflict. All of this might seem to be a long way from space exploration but what I am arguing here is that this 'doubling' of the Corporal in 'real life', as weapon and as exploration vehicle, is opened up through play; and moreover, such a mundane practice actually helps sustain these dual geopolitical logics of rocketry in the first place.

## Stockpiling and Assembling

I mentioned that the Corporal could be one part of a wider military toy set. Corgi toys marketed its 'Rocket Age Sensations' en masse, encouraging the consumer to build up a complete set of the equipment necessary for launching a missile. This included everything from the Erector Vehicle (no. 1113), the International Army Truck (no. 1118), the R.A.F. Vanguard Staff Car (no. 352), the Decca Airfield Radar 424 Scanner (no. 353), the Decca Airfield Radar Van (no. 1106) and the R.A.F. Land Rover (no. 351). The missile was thus part of wider repertoire of toys that would support the military endeavour of launch. At the same time however, the child collector might want to augment the Corporal with other model missiles produced by Corgi, such as the RAF's 'Bloodhound' – a home-grown British surface-to-air missile in service throughout the Cold War. The Corporal is thus not necessarily a stand alone object but rather it works as part of a collection, either of other ancillary equipment or of other comparable weapons. In this latter case, there is an echo of the strategic state-military practice of stockpiling: the act of creating assemblages of weapons to be seen and thus to be entered into the calculus of geopolitical negotiation. A parallel collection can be seen in the US National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) drive to circulate trading cards published in 1959 in a series of 24 entitled 'Defenders of America', one of which featured the Corporal missile and another which featured the 'FIRST FAMILY of the Nation's big Missiles' (Corporal, Honest John and Nike-Ajax). On the reverse side, it explained how 'each of these cards is a full detailed reproduction of an official United States Army, Navy and Air Force or Marine photograph'. It went on to encourage the child-consumer to 'get the entire set by eating Nabisco Shredded Wheat regularly and trading with your friends'. Similar rewards were to be obtained from other forms of breakfast. Cheerios offered small collectible 'US Army Guided Missiles each with its own launcher', with brightly coloured versions of Redstone, Nike, Corporal and Honest John missiles. A quick trawl through eBay will illustrate a ready market in such artefacts; if the scholarly interest in the Corporal has been somewhat slow to take off, a popular enthusiasm among collectors is apparent in the high prices that such toys fetch at auction.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it is largely through these networks that I have become aware of these domestic Corporals in the first place. Such toys – even ephemeral ones – are significant; they are by no means innocent signifiers of the space race. A Bowman trading card series called 'Power for Peace' also featured the Corporal under the title 'the Corporal stands tough', going on to detail how it could be 'equipped with an atomic or conventional type warhead'. Brian Sutton-Smith talks about collections as 'mixtures of imagination and mastery'.<sup>64</sup> In this case they serve to make stockpiles of military hardware intelligible in, and transposable to, a domestic context.

Most of these versions of the Corporal – in die-cast miniature or on trading card – came already complete for use by the child. But in certain instances, the child was cast as rocket engineer and was entered into the labour of building the Corporal in the first place. A variety of mostly American toy manufacturers including Revell, Hawk and Monogram also produced Corporal missiles, pre-assembled in a series of detachable moving plastic parts complete with appropriate stickers from which to build a precise scale model. In this case, the event of play was less concerned with launch or impact than with construction. But this too is an act of participation in a much wider sphere. Ruth Oldenziel has shown how model construction in mid-twentieth-century America was a serious means of developing the technical skill, stamina, patience and initiative of adolescent boys.<sup>65</sup> In one sense, to describe this as ‘play’ is to risk trivialising an important if informal apprenticeship in the development of space technology. But this is surely a further reminder about the extent to which play and work, toybox and silo, are co-constitutive. It is through such unremarkable means that the space race and the Cold War were enacted.

## BRINGING THE HISTORY OF ROCKETRY DOWN TO EARTH

Space and the atom are the two most exciting promises of modern science. Under the pressures of a world at war, the Atomic Age had an unfortunate start. As yet, fear casts a dark shadow that obscures the untold benefits that the atom has in store for us. Space flight, fortunately, will be different. It begins under the auspices of a noble international effort to be carried out in a spirit of peaceful cooperation among scientists of all civilized nations.<sup>66</sup>

Heinz Haber

Aside from notable advances in molecular biology, the 1950s saw two unprecedented scientific investigations into the fabric of Earth and Outer Earth alike. The development of space technologies like the BUMPER WAC Corporal and subsequent sounding rockets provided a much more detailed picture of Earth’s atmosphere, as well as producing iconic images of the Earth from space. At the same time, however, exploration turned in on itself – an involution – to examine sub-atomic ‘spaces’ which, through nuclear testing, produced its own peculiar geographies in laboratory and field, and across subterranean and terrestrial realms.<sup>67</sup> These developments are linked by a common geopolitical rationale that aimed to cultivate weapons of mass destruction and the means by which they could be urgently delivered to the other side of the globe. In this way, both the Space Age and the Atomic Age are folded into the geopolitical strategies of the Cold War, the ascent into

space being, in one sense, merely charismatic evidence of a more sinister capability. And yet the inseparable character of the nuclearism and rocketry was sometimes obsessively denied by the champions of space. 'Space flight, fortunately, will be different,' wrote Heinz Haber in 1956, as it 'begins under the auspices of a noble international effort to be carried out in a spirit of peaceful cooperation'. But the ultimate extent of international co-operation manifest in the 1967 UN Outer Space Treaty conception of space as *res communis* ('a thing for all') rather than *res nullius* ('a thing for no-one'), was always more of a Cold War fudge designed to check the territorial and astropolitical ambitions of the superpower adversary. Despite the ongoing presence of the International Space Station (at \$100 billion, the most expensive piece of technology ever built), space exploration has proved to be little different from the technologies of the atom: it remains a matter of competition rather than cooperation, and of weaponisation as much as civilian infrastructure.<sup>68</sup> And the current push towards dual use (civilian and military) space hardware<sup>69</sup> is itself indicative of the abiding indistinction between vehicle and weapon that was apparent fifty years ago with the launch of the Corporal. The story of the Corporal can thus be seen as an early intimation of the fact that space exploration would primarily be a matter of projecting terrestrial geopolitical power. The aim of this essay, at least in part, has been to bring the history of rocketry down to Earth.

Seen in the light of terrestrial geopolitics, the development of Cold War rocketry and the wider endeavour of space exploration become more obviously linked. In the annals of exploration, this is plainly not a new story: earlier precedents of exploring the sea and polar ice would likely offer some interesting parallels with the account I have described here.<sup>70</sup> So it is worth emphasising that the exploration and colonisation of space does not represent a radical departure from the past but should be considered as an extension of long-standing regimes of power. As Peter Redfield succinctly observed, to move into space is 'a form of return': it represents 'a passage forward through the very pasts we might think we are leaving behind'.<sup>71</sup> Some recent work on the historical geographies of extra-terrestrial spaces, for instance, has persuasively shown how longstanding geographical practices of naming, mapping and topographical description were instrumental in the construction of planetary bodies such as Mars.<sup>72</sup> All of this supports the idea that space has long been part and parcel of Earth's geography;<sup>73</sup> and that this Earthly-celestial tradition should itself be an inducement for geographers to think more closely about 'the space of space' in its many cultural, historical and (geo)political expressions.

In this essay, I have unapologetically concentrated on the popular place of rocketry within the Cold War, rather than any technical or strategic account. I have done so because it seems to me that this is where the rocket/missile derives much of its geopolitical power. The version of the popular in operation here is of course quite different from much of the

work on popular culture. Rather than reproduce the well-worn critique of, say, Hollywood film, I have chosen to focus on more mundane activities such as play and on such seemingly unlikely geopolitical agents as children. It is through these means, I have argued, that space exploration and the Cold War are enacted and made meaningful in domestic contexts. That is to say, through the ordinary rehearsal of defending 'us' (Western, free, capitalist) from 'them', using technologies that also offer a transcendent future, the child-consumer-player is inducted into a wider geopolitical frame. Not only do toys and play have extraordinary propagandist value, but more importantly, they also bring about an informal apprenticeship in domains that slip very readily into 'real world' technics and activities. Moreover, the play of rocketry naturalises the anxieties of the Cold War and arguably helps make sense of otherwise difficult concepts of loss (leaving our Earthly home) and death (via nuclear destruction). Most importantly of all, such toys bestow in their child operative a proprietary sense of the future: that the realm of space and the technical development of its exploration is something that belongs to them in their impending adult lives.

## NOTES

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15. MacDonald, 'Anti-Astropolitik' (note 8).
16. Redfield, 'The Half-Life' (note 12) p. 792 and *Space in the Tropics* (note 12).
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19. Formerly called the Guggenheim Aeronautical Laboratories, California Institute of Technology (GALCIT).
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32. MacDonald, 'Anti-Astropolitik' (note 8).
33. Neufeld, *Von Braun* (note 23) p. 351.
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