

What makes ballistic missiles such awesome weapons is that they are too dumb to be fooled, and far cheaper than any defence against them. We have built, and abandoned, several defences against ballistic missiles. Ronald Reagan referred to his plan for an impenetrable missile shield, the Strategic Defense Initiative, as his “dream”. It was an apt description.

Although the Cold War had long since ended, missile defence was again an issue in the 2000 presidential campaign. A 30-second TV commercial charged that Clinton and Gore had “left us unprotected”. On ABC News, Joseph Cirincione, President of the Plowshares Fund which focuses on nuclear weapons policy and conflict resolution, responded that he

would like to see “a cure for cancer and a really good light beer, but some things are beyond our technical capability”.

It’s an important lesson to bear in mind, Mr President. We’re getting there on cancer, and there is talk of a better light beer, but there are still things we can’t do. George W. Bush settled for a defence just against nuclear missiles from North Korea, which had neither ballistic missiles nor nuclear weapons. At huge cost, the United States developed and installed interceptor missiles in silos in Alaska — but they aren’t turned on. No one really believes they would work anyway, or that North Korea, even if it had nuclear missiles, would launch an attack in the face of certain annihilation. Retaliation is our missile defence.

You’re going to need a good Science Advisor, Mr President, but you should get a copy of *Physics for Future Presidents* anyway. Even if you don’t read it, lay it conspicuously on your desk. This book could save the world.

Sincerely,
Bob Park

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ANNIVERSARY

The art of space



It is 50 years since the foundation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration — or, more familiarly, NASA. Marking the anniversary, a travelling exhibition and companion art book, entitled *NASA/ART: 50 Years of Exploration*, have been compiled to trace the history of NASA through the eyes of some of the United States’ leading artists.

The agency, which has become the global leader in space exploration and has spearheaded myriad scientific and engineering endeavours, came into existence officially on 1 October 1958, as a fearful response to the Sputnik launch and the Cold War. Soon afterwards, the NASA art programme was created, when then-administrator James E. Webb asked a group

of artists to illustrate, interpret and elucidate the agency’s missions and projects. Since then, more than 200 artists have contributed paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures and work in other media to the collection.

NASA’s art collection includes works by Robert Rauschenberg, Norman Rockwell, Annie Liebovitz, Andy Warhol, William Wegman, Robert McCall, Vija Celmins, Jamie Wyeth and John Solie, whose painting *Return to Flight* is pictured above. The works offer insight into the pioneering spirit, the triumphs and tragic accidents, and the private and personal moments, that have formed the rich history of NASA.

The commemorative exhibition, organized by the Smithsonian Institution

Traveling Exhibition Service and NASA in collaboration with the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum, includes 73 works by the programme’s artists and is currently on view at the Art League of Bonita Springs, Florida, until 17 January 2009. It will then travel on to 10 museums across the United States, until 2011.

The companion book by James Dean and Bertram Ulrich (Abrams: October 2008. 176 pp. £19.99) features nearly 150 paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures, as well as essays by astronaut Michael Collins, curator Tom D. Crouch and novelist Ray Bradbury.

Dan Csontos