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The Imagineers Of War: The Untold Story Of DARPA, The Pentagon Agency That Changed The World

Sharon Weinberger



THE UNTOLD STORY OF **DARPA**, THE
PENTAGON AGENCY THAT CHANGED THE WORLD



Synopsis

Based on exclusive interviews with senior Pentagon officials and previously unseen declassified documents, this is the definitive history of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency--the Pentagon agency that has quietly shaped war and technology for nearly sixty years. Founded in 1958 in response to the launch of Sputnik, the agency's original mission was to create "the unimagined weapons of the future." Over the decades, DARPA has been responsible for countless inventions and technologies that extend well beyond military technology. Sharon Weinberger gives us a riveting account of DARPA's successes and failures, its remarkable innovations, and its wild-eyed schemes. We see how the threat of nuclear Armageddon sparked investment in computer networking, leading to the Internet, as well as to a proposal to power a missile-destroying particle beam by draining the Great Lakes. We learn how DARPA was responsible during the Vietnam War for both Agent Orange and the development of the world's first armed drones, and how after 9/11 the agency sparked a national controversy over surveillance with its data-mining research. And we see how DARPA's success with self-driving cars was followed by disappointing contributions to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Weinberger has interviewed more than one hundred former Pentagon officials and scientists involved in DARPA's projects--many of whom have never spoken publicly about their work with the agency--and pored over countless declassified records from archives around the country, documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, and exclusive materials provided by sources. *The Imagineers of War* is a compelling and groundbreaking history in which science, technology, and politics collide.

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Customer Reviews

As a former director of DARPA's Microsystems Technology Office, I could easily be accused of being biased. And to some extent maybe I am. But I found this book infuriating, on many levels. Weinberger is the champion of cherry-picking, for starters. Big successes, she pays lip service to; big failures, she describes in detail, as though she agrees that DARPA should be taking massive risks but that those risks ought to all pay off. What she never seems to grasp is that failures, other than those stemming from incompetence or malfeasance, are inevitable, and often teach more than successes do. Looked at one way, DARPA spends a lot of the taxpayers' money, to achieve these learnings. But compared to the alternatives of never learning at all, or having the DoD err on its considerably more massive scale, it's a highly efficient machine. Weinberger ignores thousands of technology contributions that DARPA has provided (I counted 17 such technologies in every smartphone without even trying very hard), presumably because she believes that DARPA should be striving to get back to its "essential to national security" status from the good old days that she spends most of this book describing. In her interview with Arati Prabhakar, which I found superficial and annoyingly dismissive, Dr. Prabhakar pointed out that the world Weinberger remembers has changed, an observation of much greater profundity than Weinberger appreciates. Finally, Weinberger makes no attempts whatsoever to cover DARPA's program managers, the heart and soul of the agency. What motivates people to go to Arlington VA and spend a few years, knowing there's no chance for long term employment there and that whatever programs they initiate, they won't be around to take credit for? Many of them take significant pay cuts at considerable personal sacrifice. Would you sell your house and move your family, knowing that no matter how effective you are, you'll be out of a job in 3 years? But if you don't move, you'll only see your spouse and kids on weekends, and you may have to drive long distances even then. Weinberger only even discusses PMs when she finds a particularly colorful one. This is unfair to the PMs, unfair to the

agency, it's critical to understanding why DARPA has never become just another Washington bureaucracy, and essential to the agency's nimbleness and ability to infuse new ideas continuously. If this book had been intended to be an objective, comprehensive look at an agency well worth analyzing, the role of the PM would have been front and center. Instead, Weinberger ended up with an uneven quasi-history, slanted to the "good old days", which evaluates cherrypicked examples of DARPA programs against an implicit writer's bias of what Weinberger believes DARPA ought to be doing. Finally, it isn't DARPA's job to prevent war, Ms. Weinberger. If that's what you really want, write a book about politicians and the people who voted them into office.

I'm still reading this book, but thus far it's very enjoyable, and filled with interesting tidbits and rich with history. I heard the author in an NPR interview and she's incredibly impressive. It is what prompted me to buy the book.

Reads like a disturbingly well written spy novel from the '50's-'70's, we're lucky we were ahead of anyone in the ARPA race.

In THE IMAGINEERS OF WAR, Sharon Weinberger provides a detailed history of this interesting defense agency. The activities of DARPA have been varied—perhaps by design. The authors explain that DARPA was “established it as an independent agency that reported directly to the secretary of defense.” Much of the earlier work of DARPA ended up being scrapped, transferred to other agencies, or just not helpful. For a while, ARPA, as it was known in early years, did research in satellites. Then, in 1958, this research was taken over by NASA. Of course, there was one BIG invention that was not a flop. The DARPA engineers invented a networking system, which they called ARPANET. The author recounts a funny story about the first message transmitted over ARPANET: “At 10:30 p.m., on October 29, 1969, a one-word message arrived at a computer console at the Stanford Research Institute. ‘Lo,’ read the message. That was the entire content of the first transmission sent across the ARPANET. . . it was supposed to be ‘login,’ but the system crashed before it could be transmitted in its entirety, sending just the first two letters. Of course, ARPANET later evolved and formed the basis for the modern internet. Much of the book recounts the long and winding history of the agency, and all the zany weapons projects it invented. Much time is spent describing the agency leadership. A recent director, Dr. Tony Tether, for example, wanted his program managers to “have inside them the desire to be a science fiction writer.” The authors also note, that

“More than anything, Tether loved Disneyland.” Some of DARPA’s invention turned out to be vital. And some weapon systems are still in use: “Today, the agencies past investments populate the battlefield.” One great example is the Predator drone. The real question, wonders the author, is where does DARPA go from here? What is the new mission? “More than fifteen years after the 9/11 attacks, and over two decades since the end of the Cold War, the dilemma for DARPA is finding a new mission worthy of its past accomplishments and cognizant of its darker failures.” So all in all I found THE IMAGINEERS OF WAR to be a somewhat interesting read. My favorite parts were the discussions on the interesting inventions especially, of course the DARPANET. On the other hand, I found the long discussions on the politics of the agency, and its leadership to be a bit much at times. I should also mention that this book caught my eye because I had the opportunity to work on several defense projects funded by DARPA. In every case, I found the engineers on this projects to be of top-notch caliber. Advance Review Copy courtesy of the publisher.

Have not yet come to the end but I am really enjoying the history, the politics and the crazy ideas put forth. Makes me wonder if they are behind the transparent wall!

Very interesting, although presumably the book can only cover material that is not currently classified.

Probably the best of the modern books on DARPA. However, in reading it, you get the sense that the author doesn’t really understand how organizations work: how they hire, make budgets, execute. So in the process she repeats some of the common stories that can’t possibly be true or at least true on face value. Still, the best of the lot.

Well written very well researched.

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