Stay up late to watch ULA launch a secret satellite with its most powerful rocket

Tonight, the United Launch Alliance (ULA) is set to launch its most powerful rocket – the Delta IV Heavy – sending up a secret spy satellite for the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) from California. The mission will be the 132nd mission for the ULA, and the latest of many launches the company has done for the NRO, a significant customer of the launch provider.

As is the case with all NRO launches, it's unclear what's actually going into space; the NRO keeps the purposes of its missions under wraps. However, the satellite is likely pretty heavy and is perhaps going to a high orbit if it requires the power of the Delta IV Heavy. The rocket consists of three cores strapped together, which provide more than 2 million pounds of thrust at liftoff. Altogether the Delta IV Heavy is capable of putting more than 62,500 pounds into low Earth orbit.



NROL-71's mission patch.
Image: The National Reconnaissance Office

While we don't know the exact reason for the mission, the flight does have a signature NRO patch that features a terrifyingly large animal. This patch sports a giant eagle ripping through cloth, wearing dog tags with the initials of an old Union commander during the Civil War, Col. Joshua L. Chamberlain. It matches many of the NRO's previous patches, which have showcased giant octopuses, snakes, and scary medieval iconography.

Today's mission, dubbed NROL-71, is slated for takeoff at

11:06PM ET / 8:06PM PT out of Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. The ULA plans to live stream the launch, with coverage beginning about 20 minutes before takeoff. If you don’t have any Saturday plans, check back tonight to see this rocket launch live.

Update December 8th, 9:30AM ET: *This story was updated to include the new launch time. The original launch on Friday was delayed due to a communication issue between the control center and the launch site.*

https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/7/18130477/united-launch-alliance-delta-iv-heavy-nrol-71