

The Ars verdict is in: Space Force is the best new series of 2020 (so far)

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Earlier this week, Ars Senior Space Editor Eric Berger explored the space-tech accuracy of Netflix's new series *Space Force*. Now that its first season is in its entirety, the Ars culture section split up the duties of reviewing its fun, humor, and watchability. If you're looking for a TL;DR: We all like it for different reasons, and we think it's a sharp comedy in ways Ars readers will both appreciate and be surprised by. We've managed to leave everything below mostly spoiler-free, with the exception of a couple of jokes and plot points used to clarify our opinions.

- John Malkovich, left, and Steve Carell, right, have a lot of bad news to endure during *Space Force*'s first ten-episode season, now live on Netflix.
- Carell's General Mark Naird and his wife Maggie (Lisa Kudrow) celebrate his long-awaited promotion.
- Mark's chief rival is General Kick Grabaston (Noah Emmerich).
- Jane Lynch plays the Chief of Naval Operations. Never acknowledge her gender.
- Malkovich steals the show as Dr. Adrian Mallory.
- Naird's secretary, Brad (Don Lake), is just a one-star general.

- Ben Schwarz plays obnoxious “social media manager” F. Tony Scarapiducci.
- Helicopter pilot Angela Ali (Tawny Newsome) aspires to head the first space mission.
- A preliminary test does not go well.
- Ginger Gonzaga does a dead-on AOC impression as Congresswoman Anabela Ysidro-Campos.
- R.I.P. Fred Willard, who plays Fred Naird, Mark’s father.
- Mark helps his daughter Erin (Diana Silvers) with her trig homework.
- Onward, Space Force!

Returning to TV comedy for the first time since *The Office* wrapped seven years ago, Steve Carell plays a general assigned the unenviable task of founding a new military branch in the new Netflix comedy series *Space Force*. And the Ars staff verdict is in: the series is a winner, eminently bingeable, and our favorite new show of 2020 so far.

Created by Carell and Greg Daniels (who also created *Parks and Recreation* and the new comedy series *Upload*), *Space Force* was inspired in part by the Trump administration’s announcement that it would establish a national Space Force. The impressive cast also includes John Malkovich (*The New Pope*), Ben Schwartz (Jean-Ralphio from *Parks and Recreation*), Jimmy O. Yang (*Silicon Valley*, *Crazy Rich Asians*), Noah Emmerich (*The Americans*), Lisa Kudrow (*Friends*), and Jane Lynch (*Glee*, *Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*), among others.

Carell plays four-star general Mark Naird, a decorated pilot with dreams of running the Air Force. But his dreams for promotion are dashed when he is tapped instead to lead the newly formed sixth branch of the US Armed Forces: Space Force. Ever the good soldier, Mark uproots his family and moves to a remote base in Colorado where he and a colorful team of scientists and aspiring “Spacemen” struggle to meet the White House insistence on getting American boots on the Moon (again)

by 2024, to achieve total space dominance.

Real stuff, real straightforward comedy

Part of what I, a Scrantonite, loved about *The Office* is how it mined comedy from the mundanity of everyday life. And part of what I love about *Space Force* is that Greg Daniels seems to have applied a lesson from those Dunder Mifflin days. In this show, many (*many*) laughs come from the absurdity of our current moment being played off as mundane.

The pilot alone contains an astonishing amount of this dynamic, as Daniels has plucked genuine details from NASA, private space, and the current administration and just plopped it into the script—no punchline commentary needed. (The show is very much not *Veep* and not interested in politically conscious comedy; you'll notice someone in particular is only referred to as POTUS.) Mark Naird (Carell) disses his four-star general rival Kick Grabaston (Noah Emmerich) by referencing bloated government contract bidding. He has to clarify his passionate “Boots on the Moon” recruitment pitch by noting he means American feet in boots, “can’t be certain where the boots are made—could be Mexico, could be Portugal.” And at the meeting that kickstarts the series, the secretary of defense tells the assembled Joint Chief leaders the info they’re about to receive will be tweeted within the next five minutes.

The most on-the-nose political parody this show offers comes from an AOC-inspired congresswoman focused on cutting down overspending, but *Space Force* largely doesn’t want to hammer any one particular person or group in DC. Instead, Daniels and co. use the real world’s most unreal details—an insistence on reaching the Moon by 2024, the struggle to brand Space Force from uniforms to terminology (“Air Force has Airmen, Space Force has Spacemen—nothing comical about it,” Naird says)—to

ground the absurdity of this office place and these characters.

Of course, it makes sense that this Space Force would need a dedicated social media pro who can explain to Naird how to dunk on fast food brands on Twitter. And naturally there's an assigned Russian Cosmonauts representative to help forge a better working relationship between these two "friendly" space collaborators ("Your president has asked for good working relations between the US and Russia," Yuri (Alex Sparrow) tells Naird. "C'mon, we're not China here?").

As Ars' Senior Space Editor Eric Berger hinted earlier this week, perhaps the best (and saddest) realization of this "real detail as comedic straight man" ethos is John Malkovich's Dr. Adrian Mallory, chief scientist for Space Force. Again and again, he deadpans scientific advice and analysis for the various situations and decisions facing Space Force, and he's almost universally dismissed initially. "As a scientist you have a loyalty to reason, which makes you a little untrustworthy," Naird tells him. Clearly, the world of *Space Force* had reason to march for science, too.

Without any spoilers, Naird and the Space Force do occasionally come to the light and recognize the value in rigorously informed and researched science and in evidence-based decision-making. Given how much this show mines out of facts, I suppose the writers' room wanted to remind us the most fun new show of 2020 is still, in the end, fiction.

—Nathan Mattise, *Features Editor*

- Mallory gives Mark his usual disdainful side-eye.
- Mark and Kick face off as their teams prepare to compete in a "friendly" combat exercise.
- Angela gets her game face on.
- Outmatched, but unbowed.
- Mallory and lead engineer Dr. Chen Kaifang (Jimmy O.

Yang) sift through crew applicants.

- Mark spends a week in the test habitat.
- Erin serves up some sass with those sweets.
- Car-dancing to K-pop. As one does.
- Tony offers some social media advice to a deeply skeptical Mallory.
- The intrepid crew of the first Space Force mission suits up.
- What could possibly go wrong?
- It's the minor triumphs that get you through the day.
- Space Force has the right stuff.

New heart, from a certain comedian's inspirations

Netflix was keen on establishing *Space Force*'s comedic credentials with a January 2019 announcement that hinged on the US version of *The Office*. With the trumpeting of names like Greg Daniels, Howard Klein, and one of those funny Steves, Netflix set fan expectations accordingly.

The resulting series doesn't waste time forcing those expectations to drop and give 20. Instead of a multi-camera, mockumentary format that hinges on cringe, *Space Force* pulls its cameras back in dramatic fashion and tells different kinds of comedy stories: about family, bureaucracy, and overcoming the odds.

One *Space Force* quality you'll recognize from a series like *The Office* is its focus on bumbling fools, to which I say, big whoop. That's like being surprised when a new romantic partner tells you that they, too, like pizza. Then again, Carell's latest bumbling fool lands somewhere that, on paper, sounds like a middle manager in Scranton, Pennsylvania. General Mark Naird has been appointed to lead an upstart, lower-rung US military division, and while the series is gracious enough to

give his division a one-lower punching bag for comedy's sake, he's otherwise set up to be the under-equipped dope, always chasing something that resembles success.

Space Force spreads its supporting cast out quite differently, which gives Carell a little more room to work with as a believable military leader. The series' other major dopes, including an obnoxious "social media manager" (Ben Schwarz), a shameless Russian spy (Alex Sparrow, Lifetime's *Unreal*), and an all-but-useless secretary (Don Lake, *Best in Show*), are firm reminders that Naird has gotten this far in part because of his endless well of patience on the way to the top.

But their comic relief pales compared to Naird's required work alongside legitimately principled and invested people, including a lead engineer who has the timing and input of your average *Ars* reader (Jimmy O. Yang), a young captain who is equal parts eager-to-please and over-her-head (Tawny Newsome, *Brockmire*), and the scene-stealing John Malkovich as Dr. Adrian Mallory. These cast members do a great job reminding Naird about the logical and reasonable ideas that audience members might yell at the screen while he otherwise takes a brash, brute-force approach to putting more Americans on the Moon.

Without a fake documentary crew to acknowledge and break the fourth wall with, Carell's comedy chops go in a different direction: the self-deprecating genius of Bob Newhart. Carell's general stews in his mistakes. He lets long pauses pass while the reality of his blunders sets in, before offering "wait... wait... *now*" kinds of punchlines (sometimes as whispers, sometimes as screams, always pitch-perfect). And Malkovich is equipped to play along with these pauses, sometimes killing with kindness. When a reporter asks Naird what makes their working relationship function, Naird replies, "Trust. [pause] And mutual respect." Mallory waits a beat, then adds, "Certainly, trust," with a gentle nod.

Newhart's comedy stylings always felt like an odd fit for his TV era's constant laugh tracks, so it's delightful to see his model of dry, deadpan comedy land in a series that makes sense for his perspective: optimism and persistence through the natural stumbles of life... just, you know, cranked up to 11 when lives, budgets, and chimpanzees are on the line.

—*Sam Machkovech, Tech Culture Editor*

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