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**No Liftoff: Obama's Plan Grounds NASA**

By **JEFFREY KLUGER** Tuesday, Feb. 02, 2010

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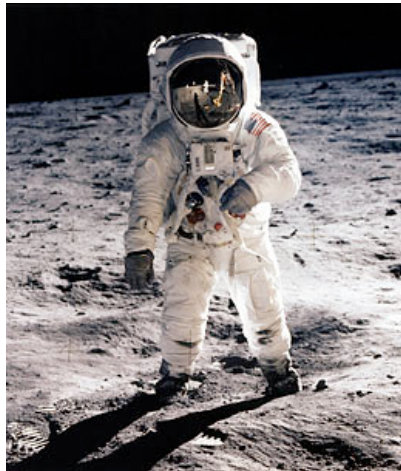
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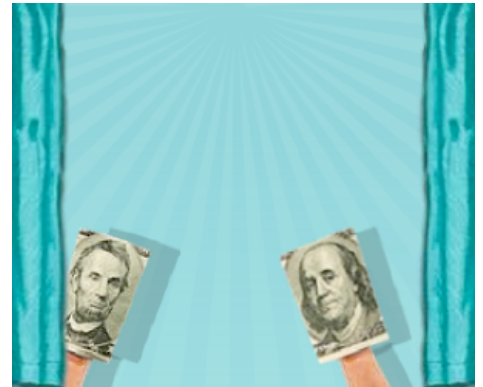
NASA will always have fans, and they'll always be rabid — folks who love the machines, swoon over the history and long to see Americans back on the moon and flying on toward Mars. For this space-happy group, here's some good news: even in hard economic times, President Obama would actually increase NASA's budget — to more than \$100 billion — over the next five years. But space junkies had better be satisfied with that positive development, because it's just about the only one.

[\(Comment on this story\)](#)

On Monday, NASA administrator Charlie Bolden unveiled both Obama's proposed space budget through 2015 and the Administration's plans for how that money should be spent. And though Bolden filled his prepared remarks with all the usual promises to "blaze a new trail," answer a "bold challenge," "spur innovation" and, of course, inspire young people, the fact of the matter is that the new plans will keep America on the ground for most of the next decade or longer. And whenever U.S. astronauts finally do return to space, they won't be going very far.

[\(See the 40th anniversary of the moon landing.\)](#)

The initiative, for now at least, is more about what NASA plans to cancel than what it plans to pursue. The six-year-old Constellation program, which had been focused on developing new boosters, Apollo-like orbiters and a 21st century lunar



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lander, all with the goal of making long-term stays on the moon possible, will be scrapped, after \$9 billion and a single flight of the Ares 1 booster last October. The longer-term goal of venturing out to Mars is being tabled along with it.

[\(See pictures of the Ares rocket.\)](#)

In place of that program, NASA will tackle a grab bag of other projects: extending the life of the so-far unfinished International Space Station (ISS) until 2020, and spending \$4.9 billion to develop better robotics, \$7.8 billion to develop new flight techniques such as in-orbit fuel depots and closed-loop life-support systems, and \$3 billion to develop new unmanned ships. There are no entirely unworthy objectives in that list (with the possible exception of the ISS), but there's also no clear way of getting humans back into space after 2010, once the shuttles are mothballed. What's more, there's not a thing in the plan that would get your heart to race. Building spaceships just for the public thrill of it may seem like a luxury we can't afford, but the new direction has even deeper problems. Here's why.

The International Space Station is one of the only major stakes NASA has left in the manned space game, and postshuttle it will be the only one. For a while the U.S. won't even have a way to go back and forth between the ISS and earth without hitching a ride on a Russian ship. The station was proposed in 1984 and has been under construction since 1998, and so far not a lick of truly valuable science has come from it. Its intended mission has changed and changed and changed again over the years, from materials manufacturing to zero-g experiments to astronomic observations to studying human adaptation to space flight. And what were the new ideas Bolden cited on Monday? "A broad array of biologic, materials and combustion research," the administrator said, in addition to addressing "practical medical questions about astronaut bone density and the effects of radiation." In other words, more of the same.

[\(See a video about private space company SpaceX.\)](#)

More problematic is NASA's planned abdication of its role as a developer of manned boosters and spacecraft. Instead, it will become a shopper, and leave the designing and metal-cutting to the private sector. To an extent, this has always been the case. The first Americans to orbit the earth blasted off aboard Atlas and Titan rockets — both built by commercial companies as missile launchers and later adapted to human flight. The Saturn moon rockets were the first designed and built exclusively for humans, but even those were contracted out. Still, it was NASA minds that drove the designs and the result was what might have been the finest boosters ever built.

[\(Watch a video of the final shuttle to Hubble.\)](#)

For the 21st century, the agency will be turning to a mix of suppliers to dream up its rockets, notably United Launch Alliance (ULA), a joint venture of Lockheed and Boeing. The company already has a big and impressive lineup of boosters that it sells regularly to the military and commercial launchers. And with 37 flights in the past 36 months, it clearly knows its business. The problem is that ULA rockets were not built for the trickier job of launching people, and not a single one of them is crew-rated. It will take at least four years to make the necessary adaptations according to one industry insider, and that's assuming no delays or cost overruns. Never assume that.

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The most intriguing new addition to the private rocket game is Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX), founded by Elon Musk, better known as the man who created PayPal. SpaceX has impressed and indeed charmed NASA, and not without reason. Its Falcon 1 rocket has been launched five times; the last two successfully reached earth orbit and the last one lofted a commercial payload. What's more, the operation — with 800 employees working principally in Los Angeles and central Texas — has something of the young, hyper-caffeinated energy of the old NASA. The space agency has already inked a deal for 15 Falcon flights, 12 as unmanned missions to resupply the ISS and three manned.

The unmanned missions SpaceX may well be able to handle. It would be a lot easier to believe in the manned ones, too, if NASA had any crew vehicle it could put on top of a Falcon, which it doesn't. SpaceX is building its own crew vehicle, dubbed Dragon, which NASA can buy — if the thing is ever completed and proves itself.

Former NASA administrator Mike Griffin, who built the NASA-centric programs that were canceled on Monday, is, perhaps unsurprisingly, no fan of the new approach. "With this policy," he says, "the U.S. human space-flight program is grounded indefinitely, because no date for the availability of commercial human spaceflight can be reliably predicted."

And even if it could be predicted, Griffin's successor has been vague about where Americans will go once they do get back to space. Yes, there's the ISS. But after that? The best that Bolden could offer in his presentation Monday were vague promises of "people fanning out across the solar system," with the collaborative help of "nations around the world." Just which nations will join the U.S. and when we will all go Bolden didn't say. At several points, however, he did encourage his audience to "imagine" all of these things.

That, sadly, may be as far as it goes.

**[Read "Space Shuttle: Same Old Damage, Same Old Worries."](#)**

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**Randall Bowman**

This is a HUGE mistake on the part of the United States. History will see us have another "Sputnik" moment sometime in the next decade or so. It will happen when either China or India lands a manned mission on the moon. Then the vast number of people in this country will look up from watching Entertainment Tonight and say, "Wait a minute! Why are we doing that? What happened to our space program? I thought we had one. Well, we should be doing that!" And it will be too late then.

3 days ago, 2:00:47 PM MST - Flag - Reply



**Matt**

At least one fact in your article is incorrect. NASA has not signed any agreements with SpaceX to transport humans to space. I would also question your statements about crew-rating, but that issue is very subjective.

4 days ago, 8:39:58 AM MST - Flag - Reply



**Jerry LaBuy**

We will not be a spacefaring nation, traveling from one world to another, in my lifetime. This is hard for me to understand.

I realize the current monetary strains. But NASA's Constellation program, which would have returned America to the moon, is not the best choice to give the ax. Private exploration is nowhere ready to fill the gap left by this budget cut. Also, unmanned exploration is not going to help advances in human research, medical or otherwise, in any substantial way. These are merely scouts if you will. And now they are scouts that will serve no main scientific research or purpose.

Should the Ancient Egyptians and Greeks have never sailed the Mediterranean? The Spanish and British the high seas? Should we as humans not wish to explore and continually push our limits of knowledge, comfort, and experience? I'm not trying to romanticize the issue, but align to you the realization that the leaders of the world have always, and will always, be the nations that dare to explore.

There are really two camps in this issue. Those that see the manned programs as a huge waste of time, money, and effort - and those that believe in the results from having such a program. I belong in the latter and the cut of the Constellation program is the biggest mistake for human research and exploration that will carry consequences for at least the next 50 years.

The return to the moon would have allowed us to research Helium-3 for fusion, research sustainable closed loop human space settlements, and send heavier spacecraft on to Mars - therefore allowing us to extend each mission much farther than if it were to originate from Earth.

Speaking of Mars, sending humans there will now be close to impossible for the next 80 years at least. The weight of construction materials, food, water, and other supplies needed for a living are simply too great to launch from Earth. That mission relied on the colonization of the Moon. So in effect my own children will never live in a spacefaring society either. This decision will probably set back exploration nearly a century.

As with any field, business, or organization, the top people are going to be with the top programs. If we have no top-level manned space program I predict the most talented minds in the field will move on from the US to other countries and groups that do. This

loss of talented minds will be hard to overcome.

You cannot stand still and expect to move forward. You need to put the effort in and at least try. You are either moving forward and progressing or moving backward and learning from your mistakes in the hope you can try again successfully. We are a nation of innovators. Of entrepreneurs. And as anyone of those people will tell you, part of your responsibility to lead is to do everything you know how to do to grow. Or else you are dying.

Where does this stagnation lead us? Absolutely nowhere.  
February 2, 2010, 10:48:21 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Donald**

They should have used one of those rockets to send Bush to the moon with 25 of his best repub friends and left them there!!  
Whose pockets was he lining when he started his MOON project??  
February 2, 2010, 9:39:21 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Larry Totten**

This is indeed a sad proposal for the future of the United States, to willingly give up its pre-eminent position in manned space travel. I think we will wake up one day and it will be October 4, 1957 all over again. Doesn't anyone remember watching TV on December 24, 1968 or July 20, 1969? This was human history, being made by Americans, and we all watched it being done. The space program was a driving force behind the education of children who grew up in the '50s and the '60s. We all wanted to be smart just so we could participate one day. I showed my granddaughter a clip of Neil Armstrong setting foot on the moon. Her comment was – "What movie is that from? It's not very good." She couldn't believe it was film from a live event. It's 41 years old and now just a part of history. Our new history will show we walked away.  
February 2, 2010, 7:57:27 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**tom goss**

The First Man on the Moon and the First Man on Mars will speak Chinese.  
February 2, 2010, 5:37:44 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Shannon Leigh Walsh-Miller**

I'm going to throw out two conspiracy theories on this one, just because it seems like it would be fun. So let us just say the government has decided there is some truth to the 2012 predictions given the frequency of recent high magnitude earthquakes. They could either 1. still be unsure if there really will be a disaster but are holding on to the money for space travel until they see what happens in two years or 2. the increase in NASA spending is going towards a funding a ship that will carry high ranking members of the government and their families out into space.

Now personally I just think they are trying to develop some new technologies to advance their long term goal of space exploration and don't want to waste the money to produce any new kind of spacecraft until those technologies are in place. Why build something that will be obsolete in a few years if you can just bum a ride off someone else and then produce a better product in a few years.  
February 2, 2010, 5:30:43 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**robert russell**

we have to save money somewhere  
February 2, 2010, 4:14:27 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Piet Los**

Scrap NASA altogether for a few years, we got bigger fish to fry on earth than this pursuit of space. What is the hurry? Space will be there next year and the year after.  
Bob Marley says: Man is on an egotrips, blasts off on his spaceship, no care for you no care for me.  
February 2, 2010, 3:35:56 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Bryan**

I am a consultant in the aerospace industry, and have been working on constellation for the past 3 years. Privatization of low

earth orbit manned spaceflight is not feasible in the next 10–20 years at least. It simply costs too much for a private company to do it, not to mention what market is there for it?

February 2, 2010, 2:06:08 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Alexander Rose**

Brian,

Clearly your position makes you well informed, but also potentially biased toward constellation. I would assume NASA will be paying for these flights, that's the market right there.

February 2, 2010, 2:10:09 PM MST – Flag – Reply

Liked by RobertT



**Bryan**

As the article says, NASA has always contracted the work out. What you suggest is the same as what is happening. Currently, NASA directs the companies on what to do and that is needed, because it requires the effort of all of the major aerospace companies to get a single man into orbit. This new budget does not give any direction for manned spaceflight and has essentially killed it at least from the US for the next decade. We will rely on Russian and in the future perhaps China and India for getting an American astronaut into space. I am trying not to be biased, I am just trying present the facts.

February 2, 2010, 2:15:06 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**RobertT**

I think SpaceX will beat your 20 year estimate handily, and maybe get some viable crew transport to ISS much sooner than your 10 year mark. I would like nothing better than to see them go public. The proper engineering criteria for "crew rating" a vehicle need to be made logical and applied consistently to the commercial rockets.

February 2, 2010, 2:19:03 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Bryan**

It would be amazing if they could. I do have a lot of hope for them, and I do like the people that work there. Good luck getting the "crew rating" criteria changed.

February 2, 2010, 2:22:46 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Alexander Rose**

This article is very misleading, ARIES was launched with no funding to support it. It was years behind schedule and was essentially a retread of Apollo but without the funds to support it. Typical Republican politics, promise the earth then cut taxes and find you can't afford anything and you run up huge debts.

This IS a risky change in pace for NASA but NASA is getting INCREASED funding. I find it laughable that Republicans are all over this privatization of low earth orbit spaceflight when privatization is the mantra of the GOP. Hell, this will mean less federal jobs in Texas and Florida, just as their Governors would want right? :D

/snark

February 2, 2010, 1:58:04 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**Michael Danahy**

**GOOD. We need to spend our time and 🤪 money on the problems on planet earth, especially on the surface of the U.S. 😞**

February 2, 2010, 1:47:09 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**RobertT**

No, short sighted. Of all the things we need to build for viable surface habitats on Mars, a fair number tightly overlap with the green technologies we might want to mitigate climate change or improve our energy independence or exploit biotechnology. **The synergy of doing both together gets you better results for either one.**

February 2, 2010, 1:53:08 PM MST – Flag – Reply



**James Myers**

Here's an idea, let's repeal all the ridiculous tax cuts for the Uber Rich that the last president put into place, get that money back in the national coffers pay off some of our debts and then we can have a country we could be proud of again.

Oh wait... nevermind... the whole space program was just another part of the socialist nightmare because it was paid for by the government. Well since we can't do anything that might benefit the greater good of the country (socialism) we may as well forget about having a country to be proud of and enjoy our discount mediocrity.

If people want nice things, they need to realize that it costs money. Vote for a tax increase for once. Obama can't do this stuff for free. Hope for a better world comes with a price tag. We get the country we are willing to pay for.

February 2, 2010, 1:39:07 PM MST - Flag - Reply



**Triple Beam**

Your ignorance is astounding.

February 2, 2010, 6:20:08 PM MST - Flag - Reply



**RobertT**

I think in the long term we will keenly regret this stake through the heart of human spaceflight. The Obama administration could have "Kennedy'd" but sadly they've "Nixoned" instead.

The commercial space flight sector is ready to grow up, but not immediately take on the mantle of human rated heavy lift. The exploration arm of this new effort is anemic, rootless of mission, and anchored in no schedule whatever. What little remains of exploration technology will likely be perverted by Congress to the usual NASA mission, viz. "please, pork up my district!"

Space exploration and green technology are much more bound together than most leaders want to admit, and the foolish always cite that old false economy of "humans on Earth first". We had the chance here to do something fundamental and remarkable and smart, but the tempo is now lost.

February 2, 2010, 1:37:05 PM MST - Flag - Reply



**Jeffrey**

I am totally in favor of space exploration, but we need to first take care of our nation's economy. It's been ruined by the failed policies of the Bush administration, who set the Constellation program up in the face of mounting deficit spending. We first should get out of deficit spending and make sure our nation is on the right economic track before we continue to reach for the stars.

February 2, 2010, 1:34:13 PM MST - Flag - Reply

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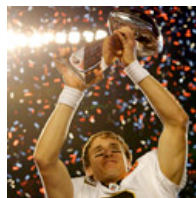


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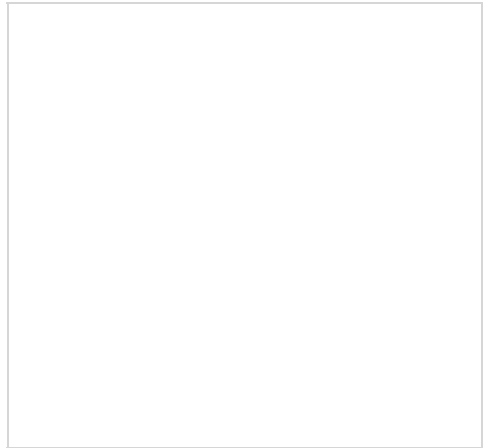


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