



Will NASA ever return to the moon?

By **John D. Sutter**, CNN

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Space technology, including this crew module, is already in development for NASA's moon-exploration program.

(CNN) -- Will U.S. astronauts ever return to the moon?

Yes, says NASA, but maybe not in a government-built spaceship -- and maybe not any time soon.

The future of American space exploration came into question on Monday as President Obama released his 2011 budget. If passed by Congress, the budget would eliminate Constellation -- NASA's project to send humans back to the moon by 2020.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Obama's budget proposal brings into question the future of U.S. space exploration

Budget would cancel Constellation, a program to send people back to the moon

Instead of building a new spacecraft, U.S. would contract with private sector

Supporters of Obama's plan say program was over budget and behind schedule

Constellation was to follow NASA's space shuttle program, which, after about 30 years of taking astronauts to space, is scheduled to end later this year, following five more flights.

Instead of building new spacecraft of its own, NASA, under the proposal, would invest in space technology research and spend \$6 billion to pay private space groups to develop and build new rockets to take astronauts into orbit.

The plan leaves many open questions about the future of U.S. space travel, including if and when NASA will ever build rockets of its own again, when astronauts will return to space and in what kind of spacecraft.

"It's almost like a reboot of NASA's human space flight program," said Tariq Malik, managing editor of Space.com.

NASA eventually will return to the moon under the proposed scenario, NASA officials said in a conference call on Monday, but the U.S. space agency has set no firm timeline for doing so if Constellation is eliminated. In addition, NASA likely would have to rely on private companies to develop the technology and rockets to send people back into space instead of doing so itself.

One big impact of the shift may be symbolic, Malik said, since canceling Constellation means that the United States will not have any government spaceships to jet astronauts into orbit or beyond.

"It's going to be gone," Malik said, noting that no government-built spacecraft could dampen the pride some Americans feel for the space program. "And there's nothing there to replace it, not even on NASA's drawing board."

The Obama budget proposal has sent confusing reverberations through the space community.

Some groups applaud the move, saying Constellation was over budget and behind schedule anyway -- so it's simply better to start anew.



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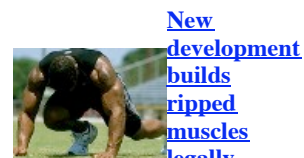
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Fuel for this argument comes, in part, from an [independent report](#) (PDF) on NASA's plans, released in October of last year by a panel of experts called the Augustine Committee.

The committee's review found Constellation wouldn't send astronauts to the moon until "well into the 2030s," instead of 2020, as projected. Funding would have to be increased to keep the program going. And NASA's scheduled \$99 billion investment in human space exploration over 10 years "appears to be on an unsustainable trajectory," the report said.

But others say canceling NASA's moon-exploration program is the wrong move.

Members of Congress have attacked Obama's proposal on two fronts: Some say canceling NASA's moon-exploration program will put the U.S. behind other nations in terms of space exploration and technological development. Others say it is wasteful to abandon Constellation after \$9 billion in federal money already has been spent on technology specifically designed for those missions.

Larry Young, a former astronaut and the Apollo Program Professor of Astronautics at MIT, said the proposal calls into question the career tracks of astronauts.

"The astronauts like to fly and anything that reduces the number of opportunities to go into orbit is going to discourage both current and future astronauts," he said.

"But we've been through dry periods before -- before the shuttle was developed and then after the [Space Shuttle] Challenger accident -- and we lived through it. Astronauts find other things to do as long as there is a future to build towards, and it sounds to me like that will be the case."

He praised the budget's reinvestment in space science research and emphasis on international cooperation on space flight, but said it saddens him that the U.S. may not longer send its own rockets into orbit.

Monday's budget proposal would increase NASA's overall budget by \$6 billion over the next five years, even while it cuts the agency's moon-exploration program.

That has led groups like The Planetary Society to say the Obama Administration maintains a genuine commitment to space exploration, even as it plans to nix Constellation.

"I think the Constellation program probably fell on its own weight as opposed to any major policy change," said Louis Friedman, executive director of that group.

The change is a fresh start that puts needed emphasis on space exploration beyond the moon, he said.

Buzz Aldrin, one of the first men to set foot on the moon in 1969, also issued a statement on his Web site in support of the changes.

"The truth is that we have already been to the Moon -- some 40 years ago," he wrote. "A near-term focus on lowering the cost of access to space and on developing key, cutting-edge technologies to take us further, faster, is just what our Nation needs to maintain its position as the leader in space exploration for the rest of this century."

Sen. Bill Nelson, a Democrat from Florida, and others criticized the

president for slashing NASA's moon-mission program from his suggested budget.

"If they don't push hard now for research and development of the new big rocket that'll take us out of low-Earth orbit and let us explore the heavens, then we are going to be falling behind China and Russia, and that's something I don't think will sit well with the American people," he said in an interview with CNN.

NASA Administrator Charlie Bolden tried to downplay fears about the shift.

"Imagine trips to Mars that take weeks instead of nearly a year; people fanning out across the inner solar system, exploring the Moon, asteroids and Mars nearly simultaneously in a steady stream of firsts ... That is what the president's plan for NASA will enable, once we develop the new capabilities to make it a reality," Bolden said in a conference call with reporters.

In lieu of Constellation and moon exploration, NASA's proposed budget appears to place emphasis on other programs -- both on Earth and in space.

The budget would spend more than \$2 billion to monitor climate change on the Earth with orbiting satellites and to observe the Earth in other ways; invest \$4.9 billion in a five-year program that would aim to send robots to the moon to study the possibility of human colonies and fund the development of space-related technology more generally; spend \$3.2 billion on exploration of the solar system; and allocate \$420 million over five years for a mission to the Sun.

It also extends the U.S. commitment to the International Space Station beyond 2016.

The budget would have to be approved by Congress to take effect.

The proposal will be greeted in Washington with a tough fight, said Malik, the Space.com editor, since legislators from states like Texas and Florida, which saw a flood of government investment because of Constellation, are likely to defend that program.

"Lawmakers have been really lashing out against this plan because it means a lot of the contracts these constituencies have will be dissolved," he said.

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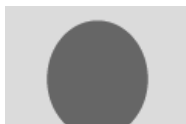
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Instead of wasting hundreds of billions in that stupid, dangerous, (two explosions, 14 deaths), and largely worthless space shuttle program, they should have focused on improving expendable rocket and space station technology. I'm sure if it had been done that way, we would have had a moon base by ...more

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I doubt it with this president; perhaps in another 50, 60 years or so maybe in another 100 years. The other countries will surpass us because of him.

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I never thought I'd say these words, but Buzz Aldrin is ignorant about space travel. Maybe it's easy for him, as an old man who's already been there, to look at the moon and say "meh," but I feel like we've already suffered 40 years of "near term focus" and it's well past time to get us off this roc ...more

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LOL!! He has forgotten more about space travel in the last 5 minutes than you have ever known in your LIFE kid!!!

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I don't see why this has to be an either/or proposition. We've already gone to the moon by ourselves. We should enlist the same space-faring governments to partner in the endeavor to get back to the Moon. This would allow costs to be split between them. Additionally, I would like to see the command ...more

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It would be interesting if we could correlate people's comments to this topic with their level of education and their profession. I would expect that the majority of the scientists and engineers come down for the continuation and expansion of the manned space program. I would also expect that the le ...more

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There will always be some exceptions, but in general I would agree with your assessment.

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M13

M13

Engineer for 25+ years? Shouldn't you be retiring soon?

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Guest

You would be wrong. I am a PhD candidate in mechanical engineering and have been an engineer for 25+ years and the space program is a complete and total waste. Over and out.

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To all the people that says do not send humans to space exploration because of money, because it is not important, there is nothing there, because we never been in the moon (same people that believe there was not holocaust) , more important things in earth, etc. Let me remind you that already mo ...more

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With the bailouts for amoral bankers, stimulus, etc. NASA is now < 0.005 of the federal budget. Who exactly is out of control?

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Some of us remember 1958 when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik and threw the U.S. into panic. Until the Obama administration had the guts to say "Wait! Enough!", we have been throwing money at space exploration. WHY? So "astronauts can have a career path"?! So overpaid federal employees at NA ...more

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Hey stupid....space travel has NOTHING to do with our standard of living. That is just more NASA fanboy propaganda.....

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Another one that believes nothing good comes from space exploration. Lets go back to horses and dirty roads

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LaraRebooted

You're conveniently ignoring the countless technological innovations that the space program has produced, in medicine, materials science, food production, electronics -- virtually every field that has moved forward in the last several decades has been powered by the space programs. You reap and use ...more

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[darklight436](#)

darklight436

the space program has done the earth good, a lot of good

and for a very long time had been working on less and less grants, until the constellation program was proposed

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cjtospin

I worked at NASA and a large aerospace company for many years. I am conflicted regarding the budget cut. Primarily, many of the projects funded by NASA have a theoretical/research application yet do not translate well to the private sector - i.e. profit. That being said the commercialization/priv ...more

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darklight436: yuk, yuk.....at least he is employed kid.

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[darklight436](#)

darklight436

where exactly did you work at in nasa? the janitorial department?

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[cheshire22](#)

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Project Constellation doesn't need to be canceled, just significantly downsized. The governments could at least continue with the \$6 billion investment towards private companies for new rocket research - that does create/maintain jobs after all.

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Downsize it. Right. Spend billions and just let people sit around and accomplish nothing to even a greater degree than they are already doing it at NASA. Good idea.

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[Meekroar](#)

Meekroar

We need to go back into space as quickly as possible, and the US gov't should not be involved. Private industry is a much more efficient way of going about it. It's got to be an "X" prize set up or some kind of contest, where a company does it on their own and then the gov't gets involved. Something ...[more](#)

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I imagine a private company will start sending people to the moon before long.

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Good. As long as it is not taxpayer funded.

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For all of the children that do not have to worry about financial responsibility and who just want to trek all over the solar system because it is "cool". That is very nice but run along now because the grown-ups have to figure out how to keep the nation from melting down, okay?

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