



Written by [James Heiser](#) on October 1, 2010

Congress Approves New NASA Budget

Nearly a year has passed since President Obama's controversial Augustine Committee's report recommended a dramatic change in the future of NASA's manned space flight program. However, it seems that little has changed on Capitol Hill. The recently-adopted NASA budget is approximately the same as previous appropriations—\$19 billion for 2011—while dramatically reducing the amount to be spent on commercial space vehicles and accelerating development of a heavy launch vehicle which would be needed for manned flights to the Moon and eventually Mars.



According to a story posted at FOXNews.com, the sudden passage of the NASA budget was the result of the House of Representatives capitulating to the Senate version in order to approve the agency's budget before the end of the fiscal year and the pre-election recess:

The bill was originally approved by the Senate on Aug. 5. The House opted to vote on the Senate's NASA authorization bill after running out of time on a compromise version proposed by Congressman Bart Gordon (R-Tennessee) last week. The fiscal year ends Thursday (Sept. 30).

The House officially voted in favor of the bill at about 11:37 p.m. EDT (0337 GMT). The 304-118 decision came just before Congress heads into recess until after the Nov. 2 elections. ...

The NASA authorization bill, S. 3729, officially clears NASA to add one extra space shuttle flight to the two final missions already planned before the shuttle fleet is retired in 2011.

It also allows NASA to extend its role in the International Space Station through at least 2020 and sets aside \$1.3 billion over three years to support the development of commercial spacecraft, less than half of the \$3.3 billion the White House has requested.

Obama's space plan tasks NASA to draw on commercial space vehicles to ferry astronauts to and from the International Space Station. Until those commercial vehicles are available, the U.S. would rely on Russian Soyuz craft to fly humans in space and unmanned Russian, Japanese and European freighters to launch cargo.

NASA officials have said the extra shuttle flight would likely fly sometime around June 2011 aboard the Atlantis orbiter. It will deliver large spare parts and cargo to the space station. The space agency chose a veteran four-man crew for this final space shuttle flight earlier this month.

The brief extension of the shuttle's life, combined with the reduction in the intended support for commercial spacecraft, could have a significant impact on the Obama administration's intentions for the U.S. space agency. The administration has pushed for NASA relying less on a fleet of its own launch vehicles in favor of sending American astronauts and payloads to low earth orbit on commercial space flights. In a sense, the proposed model would not be radically dissimilar to the way in which the armed forces regularly moves troops around the nation and the world via commercial airlines.

Companies ranging from aerospace giant [Boeing](#) to relatively new companies such as [SpaceX](#) have been



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planning on selling space to NASA alongside other customers on commercial launches in the future, which could have allowed, over time, for a decrease in the cost of commercial space flight. The recently adopted budget may call such a future of increasingly-privatized space flight into doubt and slow the development of nongovernmental access to manned space flight.

The priorities of the new NASA budget is also significant because they have placed the Moon and Mars back “on the table.” According to the FOXNews.com story,

Obama’s space plan also calls for astronauts to visit an asteroid by 2025 and then aim for a manned Mars mission in the 2030s. A heavy-lift rocket for those missions was slated to begin development in 2015.

Under the spending bill approved Wednesday, NASA would be directed to begin work on that heavy-lift rocket in 2011 – four years earlier than the White House proposal.

Given that Obama had pushed the start date for developing a new heavy-lift vehicle beyond the confines of his term as president (and almost beyond the span of a hypothetical second term in that office), any references to flights in 2025 or the 2030s are nothing more than the expression of happy thoughts. Mr. Obama is quickly discovering how little capacity he has to influence events during his time in office; any pretense of an ability to press for action to be taken in 2025 is utterly delusional. If Mr. Obama cannot bring the Olympics to Chicago in 2016, how is he going to get man to Mars in the 2030s?

The decision to move the development of heavy-lift capability to the immediate future means that the administration will not be able to push the discussion of manned space flight off for another generation. Obama’s plan for NASA would not have reduced its budget, only its launch capacity and narrowed its mission. Now it would seem that other political forces are pushing back. It would be regrettable if the development of free market access to low earth orbit pays the cost.



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