



Written by [James Heiser](#) on December 19, 2011

Microsoft's Allen Launches New Space Company

While the U.S. government's manned space program has floundered for years, lacking a destination and the will to develop new launch vehicles in a timely fashion to replace the obsolete space shuttle, several private corporations are actively pursuing technologies for carrying people and cargo to Earth orbit.



On December 13, Allen announced the creation of Stratolaunch Systems, which would, the company claimed, reunite Allen and Burt Rutan "to develop the next generation of space travel." Allen and Rutan collaborated on [SpaceShipOne](#), which flew in September 2004. According to a corporate [press release](#), the goal of Stratolaunch Systems is to "bring airport-like operations to the launch of commercial and government payloads and, eventually, human missions. Plans call for a first flight within five years. The air-launch-to-orbit system will mean lower costs, greater safety, and more flexibility and responsiveness than is possible today with ground-based systems."

The recent expansion of efforts by private industry to expand a nongovernmental role in space exploration has highlighted the contrast between the NASA and its would-be competitors. Obviously, NASA has an established history, with several dramatic successes which include the moon landings from 1969 through the early 1970s. The [success of companies such as SpaceX](#), which developed the Falcon 9 booster and is actively pursuing further advances that offer the possibility of relatively inexpensive launches to low Earth orbit, has demonstrated a growing role for private industry. Allen's new Stratolaunch Systems is but the latest competitor in a steadily expanding niche of the aerospace industry.

An [article](#) for the *Wall Street Journal* explains the technological approach favored by Rutan's and Allen's new company:

Announced Tuesday, the novel, high-risk project conceived by renowned aerospace designer Burt Rutan seeks to combine engines, landing gears and other parts removed from old Boeing 747 jets with a newly created composite craft from Mr. Rutan and a powerful rocket to be built by a company run by Internet billionaire and commercial-space pioneer Elon Musk.

Dubbed Stratolaunch and funded by one of Mr. Allen's closely held entities, the venture seeks to meld decades-old airplane technology with cutting-edge booster-rocket designs in an



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unprecedented way to assemble a hybrid that would offer the first totally privately funded space transportation system.

The ultimate goal — which has eluded corporate and government rocket scientists for decades — is to build a reliable and flexible aircraft-based launch option capable of hurling satellites as heavy as a pickup truck into low-earth orbit.

Whether Stratolaunch's "composite craft," or SpaceX's less expensive, but more "traditional," rockets will prove the more successive technology, only time — and the market — will determine. But the future of the new space corporations seems bright.

Photo of Paul Allen: AP Images



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