



Written by [James Heiser](#) on July 12, 2011

## NASA Administrator Ponders a Post-Shuttle Era

As the space shuttle *Atlantis* orbits the earth on its final flight, NASA Administrator Charles Bolden is attempting to chart a new course for a federal agency that has often given the impression of being “lost in space.”

Bolden’s tenure as administrator has been a time of transition for the agency. When he was nominated by President Obama in May 2009 and then confirmed by the Senate two months later, press reports focused on Bolden’s record as a Marine Corps major general, a veteran shuttle astronaut, and the historic role he would have as the first African American to serve as the head of NASA. [As reported for \*The New American\* in July 2009:](#)



But the confirmation of Maj. Gen. Bolden as NASA administrator should not distract the public from larger issues surrounding the often-troubled space agency. The confirmation of Bolden occurred on the same day as the space shuttle *Endeavour* launched from Cape Canaveral, and coincided with the fortieth anniversary of the greatest accomplishment in NASA’s history: the historic *Apollo 11* mission which brought Neil Armstrong and “Buzz” Aldrin to the surface of the moon.

Bolden’s time as administrator has seen the cancellation of the Bush administration’s “Constellation” program, which planned for a return to the Moon and manned missions to Mars; the Obama plan which has taken the place of the “Constellation” program still promises a trip to an asteroid by 2025, and a manned mission to Mars in the 2030s, but with delays and the costly cancellation of systems which will mean higher costs to achieve many of the same goals. Meanwhile, the shuttle program has come to an end before a replacement system was ready to take its place.

However, Bolden, [speaking with \*The Root\*](#), did not see the conclusion of the shuttle program as the “end of an era”:

Quite the contrary. I think we are poised on the beginning of another era. As you mentioned, we are ending an incredible 30-year era of the shuttle, which has brought in incredible advances in human exploration, technological advances and the like. However, since I became the NASA administrator [in 2009], our goal has been to safely close out the shuttle program.

That started in the previous administration back in 2004, and we’re finally reaching an orderly progression of winding that program down. We’re off now on the venture of exploration, trying to get humans beyond the world’s orbit — as the president has asked us to do — onto an asteroid by 2025 and then to Mars by the 2030s.

That the last *Atlantis* mission was a trip to the International Space Station (ISS) highlights the difficulties which have dogged the space agency for years. Construction on the ISS began in 1998, and



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is scheduled for completion in 2012 — at which point the station is scheduled to remain operational for another eight years. Like the ISS, the shuttle has been seen by some industry observers as a costly way of achieving ends that are of questionable value. However, Bolden's time at NASA has seen tentative steps toward a greater role for privatization in space flight. In his interview with *The Root*, Bolden noted that the resupply of astronauts in the post-shuttle era would offer an example of such privatization:

Next year we're going to enter into where I pay a fee for the service of taking cargo — food, clothes and other equipment — to the space station. That will fill in for the shuttle while we continue to develop a [commercial] capability to carry humans. I also want to be able to do exploration. We can't do that if we are still owning and operating lower-orbiting vehicles.

As noted [previously](#) for *The New American*, NASA's tentative steps toward privatization do not mean that the space agency will cut back on its spending; in fact, as with every other federal agency, Obama budgetary requests on behalf of NASA have included significant increases in spending.

NASA's future, post-*Atlantis*, remains uncertain; nebulous goals regarding missions the agency might undertake 20 years from now have more sense of wishful thinking than detailed objectives.



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