



Written by [James Heiser](#) on May 17, 2011

NASA's Endeavour Begins Final Mission

As the Space Shuttle Endeavour began its final mission on May 16, the future of NASA's human space program remains uncertain. The space shuttle program is steadily approaching its end, but the readiness of the space agency to move forward in a post-shuttle era remains to be seen.



As the *Endeavour* began its 25th flight, the inevitable blurring of science and publicity that has accompanied the manned space program since its beginning was in evidence. Related news stories focused on *Endeavor's* commander, Mark Kelly, the husband of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D-Ariz.) who was gravely wounded by a gunman in January. Some news accounts completely blurred together the scientific and 'human interest' angles, so that [one ABC affiliate \(WSET\) reported the story](#): "On its 16-day mission, Endeavor will deliver a cosmic ray detector to the space station, which scientists hope will give them a glimpse into the very first moments of the universe, just after the big bang. On board, the astronauts are all wearing the blue bracelets celebrating Giffords life."

Following the *Endeavour* mission, only one flight remains for the space shuttle program: the scheduled launch of *Atlantis* in June. The 30-year shuttle program will then end, leaving the future of government-funded manned space flight in doubt.

The [50th anniversary of Alan Shepard's historic space flight](#) was observed on May 5 — it was a poignant reminder that a mere eight years passed between the first manned American launch, and the *Apollo 11* moon landing. After a few brief years of such moon landings, a fickle public quickly grew bored watching on their televisions what was once widely believed to be impossible. And for a public that had become used to watching NASA astronauts accomplish the "impossible," the routine of shuttle launches to Earth orbit where astronauts delivered satellites and conducted experiments was ignored by most citizens — except for those very rare occasions when something tragic transpired.

Endeavour's final mission is typical of those undertaken during the years of the shuttle program: the \$2 billion Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer (AMS) that the shuttle is delivering to the International Space Station (ISS) will detect cosmic ray particles. However, troubles with the shuttle program — including the tragic loss of the *Columbia* and its crew in 2003 — raised serious questions whether the AMS would



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ever fly. [According to a Fox News interview](#) with the AMS's principle investigator, Samuel Ting, the mission scheduled to transport the AMS was actually canceled in 2005, but then restored to the flight schedule in the first days of the Obama administration; ostensibly, the scientific significance of the AMS research was deemed too significant to simply cancel.

Some Conservatives and many Libertarians have opposed the existence of a government-run space program because there is no mention of NASA in the Constitution — [just like the Air Force](#), neither NASA nor its predecessor, the [National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics](#) (which was established in 1915), are specifically enumerated in the articles of the U.S. Constitution. But one may be certain that Barack Hussein Obama's actions to curtail plans to return to the moon and send humans to Mars was not based in a sudden — and isolated — conversion to constitutional principles or sound financial policies. Certainly Obama has done nothing to reduce the funding of the space agency: the [annual budget is projected](#) to remain around \$18.7 billion a year through 2016, despite essentially zeroing out the space shuttle portion of the NASA budget (which accounts for \$1.6 billion of the 2011 budget).

American astronauts will continue to fly to the ISS, but they will be using Russian Soyuz craft for the immediate future. [As noted in an article for InterSpaceNews.com](#): "After the Space Shuttle retires in a few months, NASA will be totally dependent on the Russian Soyuz to ferry astronauts to and from the International Space Station (ISS) at a cost of more than \$753 million a year — about \$63 million per seat." The current plan is that NASA will eventually buy seats on private American launches to orbit; for example, NASA awarded \$75 million toward development of SpaceX's Dragon spacecraft. According to SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, the expected cost per seat to the ISS would drop to \$20 million.

However, what is far more important for the future of human space exploration, the decreasing cost of space flight makes it more accessible to corporations and other private interests. As Mars Society President Robert Zubrin [wrote for the May 14 Wall Street Journal](#), summarizing a plan which would allow for a manned trip to Mars as early as 2016, "There is nothing in this plan that is beyond our current level of technology. Nor would the costs be excessive. Falcon-9 Heavy launches are priced at about \$100 million each, and Dragons are even cheaper. Adopting such an approach, we could send expeditions to Mars at half the mission cost currently required to launch a Space Shuttle flight."

Recent presidential administrations have demonstrated that the future of manned space flight rests with such private initiatives. Expanding the horizons of human exploration is too important to be left in the hands of government bureaucracies focused primarily on their self-preservation.



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