



Written by [James Heiser](#) on February 4, 2010

Obama: Expand NASA's Budget; Change Its Mission

The Obama administration's proposed budget will radically change the agenda for NASA, while increasing the agency's budget.

In 2004, the Bush administration announced the start of the [Constellation](#) program, which proposed rebuilding the nation's capacity to send manned rockets to the moon, and would have developed the technologies needed for human exploration of Mars. (At present, neither the United States — nor any other nation, for that matter — presently has the capacity to send humans beyond low Earth orbit.)



Last year, President Obama appointed the [Augustine Committee](#) to evaluate the manned space programs and make recommendations for the future of the program. [A report at Wired.com](#) summarized the committee's findings last October:

Top among them is that NASA does not have enough money to fund a human spaceflight program. The agency needs at least \$3 billion more each year to accomplish the goals of exploring beyond low-earth orbit, while maintaining the International Space Station and other scientific programs.

While the entire human spaceflight program costs each citizen a mere seven cents per day, according to the report, getting more money for NASA has been a struggle. There are signs, though, that the Obama administration could provide a little more cash for human space exploration.

Obama's proposed budget demonstrates that the administration is prepared to provide more cash for the space agency — about \$6 billion annually — but it is not prepared to permit the agency to pursue the past half decade of research and development toward going beyond Earth orbit. According to a *New York Times* article, ["Billions for NASA, With a Push to Find New Ways Into Space"](#):

If Mr. Obama's proposed budget is implemented, NASA a few years from now would be fundamentally different from NASA today. The space agency would no longer operate its own spacecraft, but essentially buy tickets for its astronauts on commercially launched rockets. It would end its program to return to the moon and would pursue future missions to deep space by drawing more cooperation and financing from other nations. For some, like Senator Richard C. Shelby, Republican of Alabama, where NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center has been developing the rockets singled out for cancellation by Mr. Obama's budget, the proposed changes "begin the death march for the future of U.S. human spaceflight."

Others like Charles Lurio, a space consultant and an advocate of a so-called New Space commercial approach, were ecstatic.

"What this potentially gives us is a real space program, not a faux space program," Mr. Lurio said. "The real one is one that builds a foundation for practical use and exploration."

As expected, Mr. Obama's proposal seeks to cancel the Ares I rocket, in development for four



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years as a replacement to the space shuttles. More unexpected, the request also would kill Orion, the crew capsule that was to sit atop the Ares I. The Orion is the only spacecraft in development that would be capable of traveling beyond low Earth orbit.

Over all, Mr. Obama's request would add \$6 billion over five years to the NASA budget. The agency is projected to receive \$100 billion over the 2011 to 2015 fiscal years.

As [previously observed](#), the administration has made tentative steps toward privatization. The Obama plan would rely on private spacecraft to replace the space shuttle in transporting astronauts to and from the International Space Station. But such reliance on private corporations does not mean that NASA's spending will be cut; as in all budgetary matters under the current administration, the space agency will receive more funding, and although work on Constellation-related project will be cut back, even cancelled, this does not mean that the space agency will not pursue new technologies. Again, according to the *New York Times*:

The Obama budget proposes spending \$18 billion over five years for development of technologies like fuel stations in orbit, new types of engines to accelerate spacecraft through space and robotic factories that could churn soil on the moon — and eventually Mars — into rocket fuel.

Companies such as [SpaceX](#) are continuing to develop their own launch capabilities; in fact, according to a [February 3 press release](#) from SpaceX:

Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX) recently conducted a three-day long demonstration of cargo loading and unloading procedures for its Dragon spacecraft, which NASA has contracted to provide delivery services to the International Space Station (ISS) starting in 2010....

The tests covered a range of procedures using actual NASA cargo modules, in a variety of standard sizes, including powered cargo modules that provide temperature control for sensitive items such medical and biological samples during their journey to the ISS, and return to Earth. Dragon is currently one of the only spacecraft in the world capable of transmitting status on environment-sensitive cargo back to Earth during transit to the ISS.

SpaceX performed the tests in an actual flight Dragon spacecraft outfitted with cargo racks, stowage lockers, as well as interior lighting, telemetry and environmental systems, as will be employed while Dragon is berthed at the ISS.

Instead of exploring space, NASA's newly padded budget will [expand](#) its study of "climate change." Despite the fact that the theory of manmade climate change has suffered a number of devastating blows in recent months, the troubled theory appears to be one area of science of interest to the Obama administration — perhaps because of its potential for being utilized in an effort to fundamentally alter the American economy.

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