



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on May 27, 2009

Obama Names Bolden for NASA

“Clearly Charlie Bolden would not have taken the job if he were being asked to shut down human spaceflight,” said John Logsdon, a space policy expert in Washington, according to the *Times*. If approved by the Senate to take the captain’s chair for NASA, Bolden would be the first African American, and the second astronaut, to head the agency. Richard H. Truly, a retired Navy vice admiral and former shuttle commander, led the agency from 1989 to 1992.



Bolden’s Senate approval may be stalled by an Obama executive order that aims to eliminate conflicts of interest. As the *Times* put it, the new ethics rules prohibit appointees “from doing work that is ‘directly and substantially related’ to a former employer or former clients.” Bolden was on the board of directors for GenCorp Inc. until March 2008, and GenCorp’s Aerojet subsidiary is a contractor for the space shuttle and the Orion spacecraft programs, producing propulsion systems and maneuvering engines. Some form of “limited waiver” would probably be required for Bolden to bypass these regulations.

Whether or not Bolden deserves to circumvent these rules, or if the rules actually serve any purpose at all if a waiver to bypass them can easily be obtained, remains to be seen. But one thing that must be kept in sight is the fact that NASA isn’t the only game in town for manned space exploration.

The website RedOrbit.com dealt with [“NASA’s Free-Market Solution”](#) on May 12. “NASA Administrator Chris Scolese told a congressional subcommittee ... that the agency intends to provide \$150 million in stimulus-package money to private companies that design, build and service their own rockets and crew capsules. This is spacecraft that could send astronauts in orbit while NASA works to finish building the space shuttle’s replacements.” In fact, “the White House ordered a complete review of the entire manned space program to be led by long time friend of private space ventures, former Lockheed Martin CEO of Norman Augustine.” While it may be argued that if big government didn’t take so much tax money from businesses and individuals in the first place, there would be no need for government to dole out “stimulus money,” RedOrbit.com nonetheless interprets NASA’s generosity as evidence that “the space agency ... and the Obama administration are both ready to promote and make possible commercial human space flight.”

NASA will be awarding \$80 million in stimulus money to the private company with the best “crewed launch demo.” Top contenders are space-flight companies SpaceX and Orbital Sciences. “These leading contractors are building their launch vehicles from scratch. Their designs highlight incredibly efficient business models with low manufacturing costs.” They somehow need “only a few dozen employees at their launch sites” rather than “the space shuttle program’s 15,000 workers.” Former NASA administrator Michael Griffin believes that “when we engage the engine of competition, these services will be provided in a more cost-effective fashion than when the government has to do it.”

This is not without precedent. RedOrbit recalls that “in October 2004, engineer Burt Rutan’s SpaceShipOne won the \$10 million Ansari X Prize. His rocket was the first privately built flying machine to ever reach space.” William Watson, the executive director of the Space Frontier Foundation — a group promoting commercial space activities — sees similar exciting opportunities: “Let’s have an American competition in space — to create good jobs, fuel innovation and close the [spaceflight] gap more quickly.” He adds: “With private funds matching government investment, we can dramatically leverage taxpayer dollars to produce breakthroughs in a new American industry — commercial orbital human spaceflight.”

But how about private funds without government investment? If exploring the vast frontier of space is worth doing, why wouldn’t entrepreneurs invest in it? That’s the kind of boldly going where no one has gone before which any supporter of free enterprise would like to see live long and prosper. Only a *Star Trek* fan may understand all the references in that last sentence, but anyone who supports the free market will likely wish to see the American spirit of private innovation do its part to help conquer the final frontier.



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