



Written by [James Heiser](#) on September 9, 2009

Report Calls Continued Space Program Into Doubt

The U.S. Human Space Flight Plans Committee on September 8 released its Summary Report, projecting a bleak future for NASA's role in manned space flight for the rest of the Obama administration.

Although the president and Congress seem to have hardly given a second thought to incomprehensible increases in deficit spending, bank and corporate bailouts, and are now considering a takeover of the nation's health care system at a projected 10-year cost of well over one trillion dollars, proposed missions to the Moon and Mars are now in jeopardy.



According to [a story at MSNBC.com](#),

A White House panel of independent space experts says NASA's return-to-the-moon plan just won't fly.

The problem is money. The expert panel estimates it would cost about \$3 billion a year beyond NASA's current budget.

"Under the budget that was proposed, exploration beyond Earth is not viable," panel member Edward Crawley, a professor of aeronautics at MIT, told The Associated Press Tuesday.

[According to the committee's website](#), President Obama appointed the Committee in May of this year for "an independent review of planned U.S. human space flight activities with the goal of ensuring that the nation is on a vigorous and sustainable path to achieving its boldest aspirations in space." Now, however, talk of "boldest aspirations" has been replaced by the assessment:

The U.S. human spaceflight program appears to be on an unsustainable trajectory. It is perpetuating the perilous practice of pursuing goals that do not match allocated resources. Space operations are among the most complex and unforgiving pursuits ever undertaken by humans. It really is rocket science. Space operations become all the more difficult when means do not match aspirations. Such is the case today.

In an age of \$150 corporate bailouts and with a ballooning federal budget, it is amazing that \$3 billion suddenly becomes a roadblock to one a "vigorous and sustainable path." What solutions does the committee offer?

First, space exploration has become a global enterprise. Many nations have aspirations in space, and the combined annual budgets of their space programs are comparable to NASA's. If the United States is willing to lead a global program of exploration, sharing both the burden and benefit of space exploration in a meaningful way, significant benefits could follow. Actively engaging international partners in a manner adapted to today's multi-polar world could strengthen geopolitical relationships, leverage global resources, and enhance the exploration enterprise.



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Second, there is now a burgeoning commercial space industry. If we craft the space architecture to provide opportunities to this industry, there is the potential — not without risk—that the costs to the government would be reduced. Finally, we are also more experienced than in 1961, and able to build on that experience as we design an exploration program. If, after designing cleverly, building alliances with partners, and engaging commercial providers, the nation cannot afford to fund the effort to pursue the goals it would like to embrace, it should accept the disappointment of setting lesser goals.

Of course, the two points raise more questions than they answer. Any talk of a “global enterprise” recalls, at best, publicity stunts such as the Apollo-Soyuz mission which marked the beginning of a six year hiatus on manned space flight between the end of Apollo in 1975 and the first shuttle flight in 1981. At worst, “global enterprise” yields the debacle reminiscent of the International Space Station: over budget and with the possibility of [NASA terminating its involvement with the station in 2015](#), the station could be deemed obsolete almost as soon as it is completed.

For what it is worth, the Augustine Committee recommends continuing involvement with the International Space Station until 2020. According to the Summary Report: “It seems unwise to de-orbit the Station after 25 years of assembly and only five years of operational life. Not to extend its operation would significantly impair U.S. ability to develop and lead future international spaceflight partnerships.” One might interpret this to mean that if the United States wraps up its involvement in the last international space boondoggle too quickly, it might warn off potential partners for the next project. The problem of “global enterprises” in the space program simply multiplies the national egos and budgets at stake in every step of the planning, designing, and building future space vehicles for a return to the Moon, or a mission to Mars.

The second point — allowing a greater role for private industry — arguably makes a great deal more sense. The enthusiasm of private companies to compete for the [Google Lunar X Prize](#) demonstrates a willingness and readiness for private companies to assume a greater role in the future of space exploration, including manned space flight.

[As previously reported for *The New American*](#), an independent evaluation of the budgetary forecasts utilized by the Augustine Committee has alleged them to be grossly exaggerated.

Certainly one thing that will not happen is the “defunding” of NASA; the space agency will go on with its \$18 billion annual budget, even if it has no where to go. At this point, what seems certain is that the future of manned space flight and exploration cannot be safely left solely in the hands of government; past programs have been far too prone to internationalist tokenism and “flags and footprints” rather than developing the space craft necessary for a sustained presence of human beings on the Moon, Mars, or elsewhere in the solar system. An increased role for private industry allows those who desire to pursue human exploration to take responsibility for the cost and the risk, and, presumably, to reap any potential reward. For those who cannot perceive the possibilities for such profit, one need only point to the profitability of such an unlikely enterprise (from the perspective of 50 years ago) as satellite television and radio. The imagination and enterprise typical of the American spirit may literally rise to new heights in the years to come.



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