



Written by [James Heiser](#) on July 16, 2009

Senate Confirms Bolden as NASA Administrator

A July 16 article posted to the online tech journal The Register entitled, "Former Astronaut Takes Control of NASA" was among the numerous reports of the U.S. Senate's confirmation of Charles Bolden as the new administrator of NASA. Bolden was nominated by President Obama on May 26 to fill the position as head of the space agency.



Issues concerning a [potential conflict of interest](#) were raised at the time of Bolden's nomination because of the nominee's prior membership on the board of directors of GenCorp Inc., whose Aerojet subsidiary is a contractor for the space shuttle. But as Scott Pace, director of George Washington University's Space Policy Institute [observed](#), "This is a problem with the ethics rules when it comes to technical issues.... The community of really technically qualified experts in any particular field can be very small, and thus it can be difficult to find experts who don't have a potential for conflict."

That Bolden, a retired Marine Corps major general and veteran shuttle astronaut, would be confirmed by the Senate seemed a foregone conclusion: apart from the administration's apparent obsession with the "narratives" of various appointees, Bolden's record of service as a combat veteran and as an astronaut, as well as the historic character of his selection as the first African American NASA administrator, is impressive.

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. As was the case with several other recent shuttle missions, *Endeavour* is troubled by reports of foam damaging the orbiter during launch. The fortieth anniversary of the *Apollo 11* mission is also a melancholy time for those Americans celebrating the anniversary of the historic moon landing; the question naturally presents itself: "If America could go to the moon in 1969, why not in 2009?"

Concerning NASA's current prospects for human exploration of the solar system, "Buzz" Aldrin recently [asserted](#), "The agency's current Vision for Space Exploration will waste decades and hundreds of billions of dollars trying to reach the moon by 2020 — a glorified rehash of what we did 40 years ago. Instead of a steppingstone to Mars, NASA's current lunar plan is a detour." At a time when budget



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deficits are blasting off to new heights, such an accusation is no minor matter — especially for advocates of human exploration who hope to reach beyond the narrow confines of the International Space Station and low Earth orbit.

A July 14 [editorial](#) in the *Christian Science Monitor* opined that the Obama administration's approach to manned space flight is politically motivated (surprise, surprise) and confused: "Mr. Obama endorsed the 2020 lunar goal during the campaign, perhaps to win Florida and Texas where space jobs are plentiful. But a recent move in Congress for budget delay for the space agency and now a White House rethink of spaceflight have advocates wondering if Obama will be one of those presidents whose vision for humanity is largely Earth-bound."

What is largely ignored by the media in the midst of all of the talk about the *Apollo 11* anniversary and the Bolden nomination is the progress which the free market is making toward opening up non-governmental options for space flight. As the Senate weighed Bolden's confirmation, the SpaceX corporation successfully launched a satellite on July 14 in what has been called "a milestone in commercial spaceflight after a string of failures." And SpaceX is only one of several companies working to develop less-expensive alternatives to launching satellites and, potentially, opening up the possibility for private opportunities for people to travel into space.

Space advocacy groups such as the [Mars Society](#) and corporation such as the [4Frontiers Corporation](#) are pursuing their own path to space exploration, rather than waiting for what they perceive to be slower — and more costly — government programs. A fitting memorial of Armstrong's "one small step" would be a "giant leap for mankind" to the Moon, Mars, and beyond, led by those who are the inheritors and descendants of those men and women who opened the frontiers of the last "New World."



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