



Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 8, 2010

SpaceX Successfully Launches Rocket to Orbit

In the aftermath of President Obama's decision to dramatically curtail NASA's manned space program, many observers wondered what the future of America's participation in the exploration of the heavens would look like. The successful launch of SpaceX's Falcon 9 on June 4 may give us a first look at that future.



Last year, Present Obama created the U.S. Human Space Flight Plans Committee to evaluate possible strategies for the future of human exploration in space. The [final report](#) of the committee urged greater international cooperation as well as steps toward privatizing launches, beginning with resupply of the International Space Station in the aftermath of the conclusion of the space shuttle program.

The administration's decision to cancel President Bush's Constellation program — with its proposed return to the Moon and eventual exploration of Mars — led to very vocal criticism by advocates of an American program of manned space. [As CNN.com reported in April](#):

The Obama administration's vision for the future of manned space flight will bump the United States to "second or even third-rate" status as a space-faring nation, the commanders of three U.S. moon missions warned Wednesday.

The letter was signed by the first and last men to walk on the moon — Neil Armstrong from *Apollo 11* and Eugene Cernan from *Apollo 17* — and James Lovell, who commanded the heroic *Apollo 13* flight.

"Without the skill and experience that actual spacecraft operation provides, the USA is far too likely to be on a long downhill slide to mediocrity," the letter said. "America must decide if it wishes to remain a leader in space. If it does, we should institute a program which will give us the very best chance of achieving that goal."

A fundamental question was whether the administration's proposed privatization scheme would actually provide a reliable launch vehicle. NASA has relied since the 1960s on massive development programs contracting with some of the largest aerospace companies to create heavy lift vehicles such as the Saturn V to accomplish the memorable moments in the history of the "Space Race." In an age of satellite communications, "spy" satellites, and increased use of Predator drones controlled via satellite, the nation's launch capacity is far from merely a matter of national prestige.

Friday's launch of the [SpaceX's Falcon 9](#) is a tentative step toward demonstrating the viability of the shift toward privatization. [As reported by SpaceFlightNow.com](#):

The mission was a pivotal test not just for SpaceX, but also for the viability of private firms



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seeking a leading role in human spaceflight on behalf of NASA.

President Obama's proposal to shift piloted space missions to commercial control has put companies like Space Exploration Technologies Corp. in the limelight. And Elon Musk, a software mogul-turned-rocket designer, says his company is up to the task.

"I think this bodes very well for the Obama plan," Musk said. "I think it really helps vindicate the approach that he's taking, and it shows that even a small new company like SpaceX can make a real difference."

The *Falcon 9* reportedly functioned flawlessly; the nine-minute flight carried a mock-up of the company's Dragon capsule to orbit 155 miles above the Earth's surface. Future tests will carry the actual capsule, and would thus further demonstrate the company's ability to send humans to low Earth orbit.

The successful launch does not change the fact that space flight is an expensive venture; according to press reports, SpaceX has already invested \$400 million in the development of its Falcon rockets and [a Wall Street Journal report](#) maintains that the company will still need more than \$1 billion in investment before the goal of transporting astronauts to the International Space Station may be attainable.

The long-term success of private space industry rests in continuing to develop non-governmental markets. Already most Americans take technologies such as satellite television and GPS devices for granted, and it seems reasonable to expect that free markets will continue to find new ways to utilize technological capabilities. Some outlets for these technologies may seem somewhat extreme; "[space tourism](#)," for example, is certainly is not for everyone. But the "Space Age" is not going to simply go away; what remains to be seen is what benefits privatization will develop.



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