



The Private Sector and the future of Space Exploration

An article at [Wired.com](#) (“Rocket Booster: Let Private Sector help NASA”) keeps a free-market focus on the future of American space exploration: “After leading the way in the human exploration of space for nearly 50 years, the future of U.S. manned space flight is in question. The space shuttle makes its last flight next year. After that, NASA must rely on the Russians to put astronauts in space. Unless the country looks to the private sector.”



With delays in the manned space program that have pushed the development of NASA’s replacement for the shuttle to 2015, the future of the space agency is at a crossroads. One possible direction that could be chosen leads toward the private sector: “So with manned space flight going on hiatus next year and some saying NASA needs a big infusion of cash to continue manned space flight, another option is emerging: NASA could use commercial ventures like SpaceX to deliver cargo and people to the space station.”

[SpaceX](#) is one of several private ventures (including [Mohave Aerospace Ventures](#) and [Virgin Galactic](#)) which have been launched in recent years to develop launch vehicles for satellites, cargo, and human crews. These private companies have already made significant advances toward a non-governmental option for manned space flight, most notably SpaceX’s successful flight of a multistage rocket, and deployment of a satellite to orbit. The company’s “Dragon” module (which is projected to be capable of carrying seven passengers) is scheduled for testing, including a fly-by of the International Space Station, this year.

[Wired.com](#) notes that “NASA contractor and aerospace giant Lockheed Martin” is less than excited about such private efforts: “Lockheed Martin ... says there’s too much risk associated with commercial space flight to make that a viable alternative to a government program. *Aviation Week* reports that Lockheed Martin believes the commercial space programs could cost a lot more — in terms of time, money and safety — than a NASA program. ‘We know how difficult it is to transport to the station and we don’t want people to cut corners, and downstream having NASA pay the penalty of the time and cost of doing this,’ John Stevens, of Lockheed Martin’s human spaceflight division, told *Aviation Week*.”

The nature of the market, of course, is that if such commercial space programs are not viable, they will not survive. For a public increasingly frustrated watching a space bureaucracy that seems dedicated to going nowhere and spending lots of money in the process, such private ventures are a refreshing



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alternative. Open and fair competition for government and corporate contracts offer possibilities to these new companies that may allow them take the next steps out into the new frontier of the solar system. New frontiers offer new possibilities for human freedom, and these new companies may help to open those new frontiers.



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