



Trump's Vision of Space Exploration

The Trump administration is seriously considering a major new initiative to privatize much of the space sector, promote a return to the moon by 2020, and aim for Mars and other Solar System targets soon thereafter. This, [according to Politico.com's Bryan Bender](#), citing Trump administration internal documents obtained by *Politico*.

The central aim of the administration's new policy under consideration will be the "large-scale economic development of space," and it will entail such revolutionary moves as fully privatizing lower-earth orbit, allowing for the mass deployment of private space stations, and freeing up NASA to return to cutting-edge research in new realms like manned exploration of interplanetary space.



As with all else that President Trump has tried to do, however, this new initiative is already meeting institutional resistance, particularly among the proponents of what Trump administration insiders are terming "Old Space": mammoth corporations such as Boeing and Lockheed-Martin that have always enjoyed preferential access to space-related R&D grants and government contracts. Against them are arrayed the force of "New Space": hungry young tech entrepreneurs such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, whose respective space companies, Blue Origin and SpaceX, have made stunning advances in space technology, including the coveted ability to fly craft into space and return them — or stages of them — back to Earth for reuse, a technology NASA never managed to develop. The "Old Space" concerns and their Capitol Hill supporters — congressmen such as Senators Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) and Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), who bitterly opposed the entry of upstart SpaceX into the exclusive club of space corporations allowed to do business with NASA — are likely to resist change of this sort, since it may entail the loss of jobs among Old Space mega-employers in their home states.

The hard truth (hard, at least, for those whose guiding presumption is government infallibility as against private-sector unreliability) is that NASA has underachieved spectacularly in the area of manned space exploration since the glory days of the Apollo program. The space shuttle was a spectacular achievement, but ran hugely over cost and dominated NASA's budgetary priorities for three decades. Moreover, two space shuttles were lost, with significant losses in human life. Because of cost issues, the space shuttle was mothballed in 2011. But the result is that the United States no longer has the ability to put a human being into orbit. Only Russia and China currently have that capability, and the United States must rely on the former to keep the International Space Station staffed.

While their unmanned exploration of Mars, Saturn, Pluto, the dwarf planet Ceres, the asteroid Vesta, and many other objects in the Solar System has yielded a bounteous harvest for planetary scientists, and their array of space-based observatories such as the Hubble Space Telescope, the Compton Gamma



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Ray Observatory, and the Chandra X-ray Observatory have revolutionized humanity's understanding of the universe, NASA has been perennially a day late and a dollar short in moving space technology forward from the 1970s.

In effect, NASA and its Old Space corporate allies are seen as too risk-averse, too prone to "analysis paralysis" to take space exploration and commercialization. Former Congressman and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who has been involved in some of the Trump administration's discussions on the new space initiative, summed up the issue admirably in a recent interview:

A good part of the Trump Administration would like a lot more risk-taking, competitive, aggressive, entrepreneurial approach to space. A smaller but still powerful faction represents Boeing and the expensive old contractors who have soaked up money with minimum results.

No NASA program dominated by bureaucrats could take the risks, accept the failures, and create a learning curve comparable to an entrepreneurial approach. Just think of the Wright Brothers' 500 failures in five summers at \$1 per failure. Ask how long NASA would have taken and how much it would have cost.

Notes *Politico*, "The more ambitious administration vision could include new moon landings that 'see private American astronauts, on private space ships, circling the moon by 2020; and private lunar landers staking out de facto "property rights" for America on the moon, by 2020 as well,' according to a summary of an 'agency action plan' that the transition drew up for NASA late last month."

Elsewhere, the summary contemplates a total privatization of lower Earth orbit, including the International Space Station, a "seamless low-risk transition from government-owned and operated stations to privately-owned and operated stations." Military assets would be excluded, naturally, but the Trump plan implies a low-orbit outer space that is almost entirely privatized, full of space stations for research, tourism, and transit to other destinations such as the moon — the stuff of science fiction, that President Trump appears to believe can be accomplished only by unleashing the power of private enterprise.

We agree, of course, but the course is far from decided. Expect the old guard of Old Space and its congressional paladins to put up a fight, more concerned, as special interests inevitably are, with preserving status quo revenue streams than embracing the greater good. But if the Trump administration is able to win over NASA and enough political support on Capitol Hill, outer space in the near future may become a very busy place indeed.



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