

Jeffrey A. Krukin

Gale-Force Winds of Change

"Competitiveness never was and is not now the space program's goal, and will not be in the future — if we have a space program. It is an extremely ill-fitting disguise."

— Brenda Forman, director of international marketing policy, Lockheed Corp.

"By and large, the space station is not specifically focused on science and technology that will drive civilian industry."

— Kent Hughes, president, Council on Competitiveness

The category-five political hurricane named change is roaring straight at NASA. It is clear that U.S. economic revival is the topic of politically correct conversation in the power corridors of Washington. How will NASA fit? How should NASA be? What will NASA do?

As a matter of survival, NASA must bend with the wind. The question is how much. NASA has much to offer in the United States' quest to enhance the technological base so necessary to compete in the global marketplace. To hasten the movement of new technologies from research labs to the marketplace, NASA must be a more effective partner within the private enterprise

system.

A focused partnership to develop the single stage to orbit technology is an example of this. Forman said economic competitiveness is not now — and never was — the goal of the American space program. True enough, but it is important to remember that two other competitive instincts — political and ideological — were the true parents of the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs. NASA raced the clock against awesome managerial and technological challenges to beat a competitor to the moon.

Forman asserted that it is not likely that economic competitiveness will be a space program goal in the future. This demonstrates striking lack of vision. Why can't NASA work with the private sector and assist with its economic competitiveness? Private industry faces the same obstacles NASA did in the 1960s: learning new managerial techniques, developing new technologies and beating the competition. That is not to say competitiveness should be NASA's only mission, but it is a role that should be explored rather than quickly dismissed.

As for Hughes' point of view, NASA must

make space more relevant to U.S. national concerns, but it should not be the only yardstick used to determine the value of NASA's work. All too often, a focus on today's problems leads to a myopic view and neglect in considering and planning for future needs. Investing in space must be more than a jobs program, more than a means to monitor our environment, and more than a partner to aerospace companies as they struggle to compete with foreign firms.

Mission to Planet Earth is not enough. It should not even be a NASA program. Space spectaculars are equally important, and obtainable. They do not need to be cost spectaculars, and perhaps the current political and economic climate will finally force the NASA-industrial complex to accept this and work accordingly.

The excitement of planetary probes and humans in space is doubly necessary in an age where cynicism seems to be more acceptable than challenge and risk. Our society does not lack managerial talent, technical skill, or financial strength to solve our immediate problems and to accomplish great feats in space. What is missing is courage, vision and leadership among those deciding the next step.

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