

# OUTLOOK

Editorials & Opinion

By JEFF KRUKIN

**H**AVE you heard it? Do you see it? Can you feel it? Steadily, and with increasing visibility, our federal space program is collapsing upon itself.

Even if the engineering positions remain at the Johnson Space Center, as some area congressmen are predicting, the fact remains: The National Aeronautics and Space Administration is still operating with a 1960s perspective that views space primarily as a federal domain. This mind-set must change.

For some time, many have called for our government to function more like a business. Well, that includes NASA. Restructuring ... right-sizing ... smaller budgets ... a new vision must continue to be

## Our space program must adapt to ... market realities.

articulated from the top. That is what has happened in corporate America. After many false starts and much soul-searching, this country's private sector has struggled to reinvent itself for the global demand economy. Those who succeed, thrive. Those who fail, wither and die. The

# Storm clouds roil over NASA

Krukin, a Houstonian, is a systems engineer with a software company. He is a member of the board of directors of the Space Frontier Foundation, which believes in increased commercial activity in space and its resources.

overall result is a more vibrant and competitive economy.

The signs are everywhere that some in NASA and the Congress now understand that our space program must adapt to the same market realities: public calls for the shuttle to be transferred to the private sector; expectations of continued decreases in NASA's budget; plans to consolidate similar functions spread across multiple NASA field centers.

NASA is undergoing a painful transition.

It remains to be seen if this is a rebirth or a maelstrom of complete destruction.

Is this necessary? Absolutely. Is this good? Very absolutely.

It is necessary for the same reasons it has been necessary in our corporations. Like the private sector, a government program cannot long survive without providing value to some large constituency. For corporations, that constituency is always the purchasing customer. For NASA, it has always been the American people who needed to know our system was superior to that of the Soviets.

That was proven years ago, and now we need different reasons to purchase (through our taxes) a space program. But perhaps more than that, we will only purchase an efficient and effective program that yields tangible results at a low com-

mon denominator. Keeping aerospace workers employed, both here and in Russia, is not reason enough; circling the Earth isn't either; nor is basic science.

While each of these appeals to a small constituency, together they do not excite enough of America. They do not reach that low common denominator where the space "un-enthusiast" lives, the individual who is not excited about space for its own sake, but would be excited if it added something tangible to his family. So where do we go with this?

The turmoil mentioned earlier is good because it can lead to space activities, not a space program, which naturally provides the lowest common denominator: products and services we can buy.

See CHANGE on Page 4C.