

Congress Shows Lack of OldSpace Leadership... Let Alone NewSpace Leadership

Contributed by Jeff Krukin
Friday, 07 December 2007

Not that anyone should be surprised. Indeed, how can you expect an organization of 535 individuals to come together and agree to lead as a unified body on anything but the most urgent and important national issues. I mean, how often can you get your family or friends to agree on far less crucial matters... or even truly weighty concerns like who should win on "American Idol?"

From another angle, one may ask if we really want Congress to lead, or do we prefer Congress to follow the lead of its constituents... the American people? If this is the case, then we aren't showing much leadership, either. Again, no surprise, considering the constant drumbeat of gloom and doom. Sometimes it's all we can do to hunker down and stay out of the way.

In either scenario, in a democracy such as ours this often leads to poor politically-motivated decisions by our elected officials, meaning real problems don't get addressed. What's this got to do with space?

Well, here we are, three months into the Federal Government's 2008 Fiscal Year (and budget), and most of the government is paying its bills and salaries under the mechanism known as "continuing resolution," which Congress uses when it goes home for Christmas before passing appropriation bills that fund agencies and departments.

NASA's FY2007 budget was funded under a continuing resolution that essentially froze its budget at FY2006 levels, which pushed the expected operational introduction of the Orion capsule (the crew-carrying element of the shuttle replacement) from Sept. 2014 to March 2015... further increasing the US human spaceflight gap which begins with the shuttle's 2010 retirement. If NASA is again funded via a continuing resolution for FY2008, the gap would very likely increase.

The lesson here... and this is going to hurt... is that NASA is, first and foremost, just another government agency that is hidebound by the same political whims and financial constraints as all other government entities. In other words, just because NASA "does" space doesn't make it special... not since Apollo 11 landed on the Moon in 1969. Not when politicians have far more pressing concerns dictated by their constituents who don't push NASA to the top of the collective list. Is this the best we can do in this country to open the space frontier to all humanity, to explore and settle the Solar System and develop the resources we need on Earth? It's clearly the best we can expect from our Federal Government's OldSpace approach.

Good thing we've got NewSpace visionaries in several state governments and in many entrepreneurial firms from coast-to-coast, because it's looking more and more likely that this will be the engine that drives us to the Moon, the asteroids and the rest of our stellar neighborhood. I just hope I can get "American Idol" after a hard days work of asteroid mining!