

# NASA Gets Out of the Way

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President Obama's FY2011 NASA budget brings about the fall of the Constellation Program and the subsequent high-profile rise, and responsibility, of the NewSpace industry. NewSpace now has a bright and shiny target on its back, and it best deliver results. As the saying goes, be careful what you ask for, you just may get it.

Of course, such a massive change in direction is going to unleash massive amounts of wailing and gnashing of teeth, especially from the Senators and Congresspersons of Alabama, Florida, and Texas. Sen. Shelby remains true to form with this recent labeling of NewSpace rocket manufacturers as "rocket hobbyists." Senator Shelby, when was the last time you saw a hobbyist rocket the size of SpaceX's Falcon 1, which has delivered a customer's payload to orbit?

For those who scream that the U.S. is ceding its space exploration leadership, consider that that is precisely what would have occurred if we continued with the politically and therefore fiscally unsustainable Constellation program. This nation faces massive government budget deficits for the foreseeable future. As stated in the New York Times today ("Deficits may alter U.S. politics, global power"): "By President Obama's own optimistic projections, American deficits will not return to what are widely considered sustainable levels over the next 10 years." There is no way the American public was going to support the NASA budget required to succeed in the old way of doing space business. You can't lead in space if you can't get there reliably, repeatedly, efficiently, and at a reasonable cost, and we've certainly learned by now that NASA cannot accomplish such a feat.

In fact, it is precisely the old way of doing business in space that has brought us to where we are today. If you believe our space exploration program is in trouble and ceding U.S. leadership, why would you want to attempt to fix the problem by doing more of the same?

For those who fear it will take longer for American to return to the Moon or go on to Mars with NASA's new partnership with NewSpace, I share that concern. But I also believe far too much emphasis is placed on the insistence that we return to the Moon and go on to Mars by a specific date. The issue of when we arrive at the Moon and Mars is far less important than how we get there. It is far more important, and far more economically valuable and scientifically useful, to create an economically sustainable path to space exploration, development, and settlement... even if it means taking longer to get to those first destinations for decades to come. With this approach, we may reach those first destinations later than we like, but we are far more likely to have the Earth-space transportation infrastructure for traveling to many other destinations. Remember, the goal is to extend humanity and its economy into the solar system, and that can't be done in a hurry as was done with the Apollo program. If we want it all, then being in a hurry won't work.

In my Oct. 4, 2009 blog entry *To Bold(en)ly Go Where NASA Has Gone Before*, I made a few points that I'd like to revisit:

1. I wrote that Administrator Bolden would take NASA down a path where it's been before, in that NASA has made both half-hearted and sincere efforts to nurture NewSpace, and it has worked to crush NewSpace companies. This time, the path is a fast-moving highway, and while Bolden's sincerity was evident at his talk at the National Press Club this morning, it remains to be seen if elements within NASA will attempt to sabotage this new direction. I wrote that I expect the Old Guard to fight these changes every step of the way, and I believe this will happen. It is here that we'll learn how effective, or not, will be Bolden's leadership.

2. I wrote that I didn't expect President Obama to dramatically change the status quo. Happily, I got that completely wrong, and the President is to be commended for his vision and political courage.

3. I wrote that I don't expect Congress to support dramatic changes at NASA, and we're still in wait-and-see mode on this. The next few weeks will be most interesting, and hopefully I'll be wrong on this.

In closing, permit me to butcher one of my favorite poems: Constellation falls apart, NASA's center cannot hold. The NewSpace tide is loosed upon the world, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned. ("The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats)