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## In Search of a Conservative Space Policy

*Rand Simberg*

American civil space policy has been in turmoil since February 2010, when the Obama administration clumsily rolled out its new plan for NASA's human spaceflight program along with its budget announcement. The new plan cancelled Constellation, the program intended to carry out President Bush's 2004 goal of returning to the Moon by 2020, a goal that a blue-ribbon review panel had pronounced unrealistic under available budget constraints. The new plan also required NASA, after the already scheduled retirement of the space shuttle in 2011, to rely on the private sector to deliver its astronauts to low-Earth orbit and the International Space Station, just as it has been doing for satellites for years. And the new plan emphasized the development of technologies that would enable a potential return to the Moon sooner than the failing Constellation plan—as well as open up the rest of the solar system to affordable human access.

The political reaction has been, to put it mildly, bizarre. Some conservative members of Congress, who would normally be expected to defend private industry against a large government bureaucracy, have instead attacked it. For example, Senator Richard Shelby (R.-Ala.) denigrated private space companies as mere “commercial hobbyists”—even though that

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category includes multibillion-dollar firms with decades of space-launch experience, like Boeing. Meanwhile, the Obama administration, which has hardly been shy about intervening in and remaking entire sectors of the economy, has in this one instance declared its intention to outsource a longtime government function to the private sector. As one space policy analyst put it, “Democrats don’t think that capitalism works within the atmosphere, and Republicans apparently don’t think it works above it.”

This political confusion raises the question: What would a genuinely conservative space policy look like? To answer this, one must first understand the history of the U.S. manned spaceflight program—how it got started on the wrong foot, and how it is now shaped more by pork and prestige than by actually accomplishing useful things in space.

**T**he Sputnik launch in 1957 was the single greatest determinant of early U.S. space policy decisions—decisions that have continued to resonate for the past half century and affect plans well into the decades ahead. The little beeps coming from that Soviet satellite, heard by amateur radio operators the world over, seemed to toll an ominous warning to a complacent nation. Back then, to be a conservative meant, among other things, to fiercely oppose the existential threat of Soviet communism—and to be willing to take almost any action to contain or defeat it. In response to being beaten into space, the U.S. government quickly accelerated its own space efforts. Partly as a propaganda ploy, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established NASA in 1958 as a purely civilian space agency to demonstrate that, unlike the Soviets, American civil space activities would be peaceful, and cleanly separated from military pursuits.

For its first three years, NASA was a small agency of ad hoc programs with limited goals. But John F. Kennedy made the issue of the “missile gap” with the Soviets a cornerstone of his campaign, and when he came into the White House in 1961 he determined to make space a major Cold War battleground. In May 1961—a month after the stinging Bay of Pigs fiasco, as well as another shocking Soviet achievement, the first man in space—Kennedy made his commitment to landing a man on the Moon, in part to distract from those events. So we had a space policy that urgently sought a victory in a crucial war of international prestige—an eminently conservative objective. Unfortunately, it was almost perversely unconservative in design. In order to defeat a state-socialist enterprise, we ourselves set up something resembling one: a hugely funded government space agency. Although we wanted to disprove the Kremlin’s continuous

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bluster about the inherent superiority of socialism, the great irony of space history is that we created a massive, centralized, command-and-control agency to get the job done. The space race pitted a democratic regime against a totalitarian regime, but it would be inaccurate to say that it pitted a free-market approach against a statist approach—for both countries' approaches were quite similar.

Of course, the failure to craft a space policy more in keeping with America's tradition of free enterprise is completely understandable given the political exigency of the moment, with the nation and its leaders panicked in the midst of an international gladiatorial battle. But this initial mistake was compounded again and again. First, during the Apollo era, the United States ratified the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which essentially declared all areas off the planet—that is, almost the entire known universe—immune from claims of national sovereignty. The United States was eager to sign on to such a treaty partly to slow the escalating cost of the space race, and also to avoid the risk of having the Soviets claim the Moon if they managed to get there first. And while the treaty does not explicitly forbid the private ownership of assets in space, it fails to positively establish a system of property rights, and its denial of territorial sovereignty in space complicates future efforts to establish such a system. Industry, order, and prosperity depend upon property rights; by essentially rejecting them, the treaty forsakes a fundamental American principle. As a result, the development of space has been stifled.

Also, the U.S. space program very quickly became high-quality pork. As vice president and later president, Lyndon Johnson was determined to use the program to help industrialize the South, not unlike what the Tennessee Valley Authority had done during the Great Depression. NASA opened centers of high-technology jobs in Florida, Alabama, Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana, and, of course, Johnson's home state of Texas. (Historian James C. Bennett has pithily described the space program as a "Marshall Plan for the Confederacy.") There is no "natural" location, for instance, for a mission control center—but when Rice University offered up the land for such a facility in Johnson's home state, it became a done deal, and soon Houston's Johnson Space Center (as it is now known) was born.

Since that time, numerous opportunities to create a space policy more in keeping with American values have been passed up. Instead, the Apollo program was succeeded by programs in the same government-centric mode: the space shuttle and International Space Station, both of which have

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utterly failed to meet their stated goals of making access to space affordable, safe, and routine, and providing a stable site for performing valuable science in low-Earth orbit (the worth of which has always been oversold, relative to other federally-funded science). The reason for these failures is simply that, while those were the *stated* purposes of the shuttle and space station, they were not the *politically relevant* purposes of those programs. No one was fired and no one lost an election just because those goals went unmet. As long as the jobs continued, the rest didn't much matter.

A half century ago, the United States established a centralized federal space bureaucracy with a massive budgetary authority and a lofty-sounding but nebulous charter. It was soon subverted by pork, and remains that way today, with little to show for all the taxpayer dollars spent. Our space policy remains stuck in the era of its creation—the height of the Cold War. Only now, decades after the end of that conflict, are there glimmerings of a new approach.

**T**he winding down of the shuttle program gives us an opportunity to consider how best to reconfigure U.S. civil space policy so it is more in keeping with our nation's founding principles. To do so, we must address two fundamental questions. First, what is the purpose of having a national space program? And second, how can that purpose best be fulfilled while adhering to the principles and practices that have made this nation great, such as free enterprise, private initiative, entrepreneurial risk-taking, competition, and individual responsibility?

First, to the question of purpose. Is our purpose to *explore* space—as is commonly assumed, at least by NASA? What does this mean? Is exploration purely a scientific endeavor, with no intended benefit? Or do we want, in addition or instead, to *develop* space, as we developed the American continent? Most importantly, do we want to *settle* space, and seed it with life and humanity?

These are weighty matters, related to some of the deepest problems of history and political philosophy as well as differing visions of the human future. For the sake of the present discussion—that is, with the particular aim of devising a space policy that American conservatives ought to embrace—let us simply posit that our purpose should be to advance the national interest and human flourishing, extending into space freedom, democracy, capitalism, and the institutions that promote them.

The next question is how best to achieve that goal. Clearly, the approach taken so far has been ineffective in expanding humanity beyond

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the planet: we have spent hundreds of billions of dollars over six decades, and all we have to show for it is a few hundred people visiting space briefly, and a single permanent facility housing a handful of people at enormous cost. NASA's most recent fifteen-year plan to send a few astronauts to the Moon again—after spending many tens of billions of dollars more—became yet another quagmire, which is why the administration's cancellation of the plan was neither surprising nor unreasonable.

If we want to make real progress in space, progress beyond sending a few astronauts on short visits to places we have already been at a cost of billions of dollars per ticket, we must adopt an approach aligned with core American ideals. We should prefer robust, redundant commercial capabilities to fragile, expensive, government-designed ones. (Recall that after both the *Challenger* and *Columbia* accidents, the shuttle program was shut down for years, leaving the United States with no means of getting Americans into space.) Rather than avoiding technical risk by repeating what we did five decades ago—"Apollo on Steroids" was how NASA's then-administrator Michael Griffin described the revamped lunar program in 2005—and thereby starving technology development, we should prefer an agency that is aggressively pursuing technological advances that will increase our reach while reducing costs. As much as we are grateful for NASA's historic victories in the space race, when it comes to basic access to space we should roll back the agency's mission to something resembling that of its predecessor, the National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics (NACA). Through its basic and applied research, its dissemination of information, and its strategic grant-making, NACA did much to boost the aviation industry during the first half of the last century. NASA should be reconceived along those lines, to serve primarily as an enabler of, rather than a substitute for, private enterprise. This will in turn allow it to focus its scarce resources on more cutting-edge human missions *beyond* low-Earth orbit.

The new direction for NASA set forth by the Obama administration in early 2010 is a good first step; despite the administration's big-government approach in other areas, the proposed NASA policy is careful and conservative. Policymakers should work quickly to enact it, and should resist all last-ditch efforts to preserve space pork and earmarks—such as those at play in the authorization bill that passed Congress in September 2010. That bill specifies that NASA build a heavy-lift vehicle for which there is no clear mission other than maintaining jobs in Alabama and Utah—all

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while starving more vital expenditures. Meanwhile, by failing to pass an appropriations bill, the 111th Congress did not appropriate to NASA the funds needed to work on the rocket. This legislation should be revisited.

And looking forward, the new Congress should soberly review our space goals and our means of achieving them. Let us not waste this moment: We have before us an opportunity to put in place an effective space policy, one that at last opens up the new space frontier in the best, and perhaps only, way it can truly be opened—by relying on traditional American values and virtues.

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