

The Return of the Space Debate

The Bush administration has been almost entirely silent about its plans for NASA since the president announced his new space exploration policy in January. This has led some critics to claim that the administration has dropped its ambitious plans and given up on space exploration.

The silence is misleading: Although the attention of the White House has largely been focused on the war in Iraq and the demands of the election season, the administration has continued working quickly and quietly on its new space policy. According to press reports, NASA is “bustling” with activity, drawing up plans for robots, boosters, spacecraft, and other hardware needed for the first steps in Bush’s plan to head to “the Moon and Mars and beyond.” High-ranking NASA officials have been studying how to reorganize the agency to better match its new focus on exploration; they are, according to UPI, planning the “most far-reaching revamping of NASA since its creation in 1958.” The ten-member Moon-to-Mars Commission held a series of public hearings around the country and will release in June its recommendations for the new space plan. And the president is reportedly planning to make further comments on space this summer.

There have been stumbles along the way, too. NASA Administrator Sean O’Keefe’s announcement in January that the Hubble Space Telescope wouldn’t receive a repair visit from the space shuttle doomed the productive and popular scientific instrument. The announcement angered several members of Congress, and the subsequent handling of the matter—with shifting rationales for the Hubble decision, followed by what can only be described as a laughable proposal to repair the telescope robotically—has been politically distracting and damaging.

And in an election year, every political point matters. Any further comments from the president on space are likely to be seen in the context of this year’s election. With Senator Kerry already on the record opposing the president’s plan—he said we shouldn’t “talk about going to the Moon or even to Mars”—it is possible that space could become a side issue in this year’s campaign, with Kerry pigeonholing Bush as a starry-eyed spendthrift. The only way the president can fend off those attacks is by keeping a tight leash on space spending—and the only way to do *that* is by committing to demanding deadlines.

Finally, if the president does hope to squeeze any political value out of his space policy, he will have to emphasize a goal that can inspire the public and fire its imagination. That goal, as the president made clear in January, is the human exploration of Mars, where two great mysteries await us. First, a profoundly important mystery of science: Did Mars—*does* Mars—harbor life, as mounting evidence suggests? Second, a mystery of mankind’s future: Will humans ever leave Earth and settle other worlds? We won’t learn the answers to these questions during President Bush’s tenure, but by working now to lay a solid foundation for our nation’s space exploration program, the president can ensure that we will learn them, someday.