

Bush promises the Moon (and Mars) but offers only rhetoric

Walter Gilberti, Patrick Martin
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President George W. Bush delivered an address to NASA on January 14, outlining his plans for the US space program and calling for NASA to reorganize itself to establish a permanent settlement on the Moon and an eventual manned mission to Mars.

Bush's speech suffered from acute contradictions of both style and substance. White House speechmakers crafted flowery phrases about the "spirit of discovery" and comparing the US exploration of space with the Lewis and Clark expedition 200 years ago that explored the vast territory that later became the Louisiana Purchase.

Such words cannot transform a pathetically narrow and limited individual into a visionary, no matter how much a servile media tries to pretend otherwise. Bush's indifference to considerations of both history and exploration (geographical or intellectual) is notorious. He never visited the European continent during the three decades of his adult life before he entered the White House, despite countless opportunities provided by wealth and family connections. He cannot even be induced to "explore" the pages of an American newspaper.

Bush and his political handlers clearly timed the speech to cash in on the spectacular success of the latest NASA mission to Mars. But the substance of the Bush administration's policy is diametrically opposed to proposed goals of returning to the Moon and sending a manned mission to Mars. It would have been more honest, although entirely out of keeping with the Bush administration's usual practice, if the president had simply announced that he was scrapping NASA and that its thousands of scientists and engineers should start looking for other jobs, preferably with the Pentagon's space-based missile defense program.

Bush declared, "America has not developed a new vehicle to advance human exploration in space in nearly a quarter century. It is time for America to take the next steps. Today I announce a new plan to explore space and extend a human presence across our solar system. We will begin the effort quickly using existing programs and personnel. We will make steady progress, one mission, one voyage, one landing

at a time."

The vagueness of Bush's proposals, concealed by their seemingly sweeping scope, have only a superficial resemblance to the pledge made by John F. Kennedy forty years ago that the United States would place a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s. They are rather a cynical and hastily put together public relations ploy, designed to deflect attention from the continuing political/military crisis in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as to present to the public the illusion of an administration with a vision of the future.

The element of charade in the Bush administration's sudden desire to "boldly go where no one has gone before" comes more clearly into focus the closer Bush's proposals are examined. In his speech, he outlined three goals. In the first, he called for the scrapping of the now crippled Space Shuttle program by the year 2010. Meanwhile, the remaining shuttles, outmoded and decrepit, and harboring unknown and potentially catastrophic flaws, will be pressed into service "as soon as possible" to complete the International Space Station.

Bush then proposed the development and testing of a new spacecraft by 2008. Unlike the plans for the original Space Shuttle program unveiled by Richard Nixon 30 years ago, this new vehicle remains a completely unknown quantity. "The crew exploration vehicle will be capable of ferrying astronauts and scientists to the space station after the shuttle is retired. But the main purpose of this spacecraft will be to carry astronauts beyond our orbit to other worlds," Bush declared.

But what kind of vehicle is this? Just as a ferry may traverse a river, but is ill suited for traveling the open ocean, a new generation shuttle craft designed to ferry scientists and astronauts back and forth from the International Space Station would be incapable of taking anyone to "other worlds." The third goal, the most grandiose, as outlined in Bush's speech, involves the establishing of a permanent manned lunar presence by the year 2020, as a steppingstone to the manned exploration and colonization of Mars.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of these proposals,

however, is contained in his explanation of how these projects will be financed. Bush is proposing that NASA will receive a meager \$1 billion in new money over the next three years, while \$11 billion will be scavenged from existing NASA programs. The process of dismantling many of NASA's positive achievements is already underway. On Friday NASA officials announced the cessation of attempts to repair and upgrade the Hubble Space Telescope, a remarkable piece of technology that has produced stunning photographs of the wonders of deep space.

The reorganization of NASA in accordance with Bush's proposals will also call into question the continued funding of the Hubble telescope's replacement, as well as other compelling exploratory missions similar to the recent unmanned *Galileo* explorations of the outer planets, and last week's exploratory passage through the tail of a "local" comet. In effect, programs involving genuine scientific research will either be scrapped or be greatly scaled back to accommodate Bush's plans.

No one, not even Bush's toadies in Congress, believe that the president's proposed budget even begins to address the cost for such a grandiose scheme. Nevertheless, the initial reactions were generally favorable. Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., who heads the House Science Committee that oversees NASA's budget, was quoted in the *Houston Chronicle* as saying the proposals are "realistic and doable," while Florida Senator Bill Nelson, a Democrat who flew on the space shuttle in 1986, expressed skepticism about the financing, but added; "If the president will lead, Congress will support it."

More knowledgeable observers were scathing in their characterization of the Bush plan. John E. Pike, the director of GlobalSecurity.org, a Washington-based research group on military and space topics, said that the Bush proposals were dangerous election year grandstanding. He told the *New York Times*: "The trivial budget increases they're proposing are only going to produce artwork. Basically, they looked at piloted space and said, 'Let's shut it down and let's have a hedge against the possibility that the Chinese will go to the Moon.' That's it. There's nothing to replace shuttle and station except artwork."

Electoral considerations are certainly an issue, especially given that the lion's share of space spending goes to companies and facilities in California, Texas and Florida, three of the four biggest prizes in the Electoral College.

But there are even crasser concerns. There will be fat contracts awarded to corporations supportive of the administration. Already, as reported in *Petroleum News*, NASA is working with Halliburton, Baker-Hughes, Shell Oil and others to develop drilling technologies that could work in the Martian environment, ostensibly to search for

evidence of life on the "Red Planet." (This from an administration adamantly opposed to stem cell research or any scientific assessment of global warming).

And like every policy decision emanating from the Bush administration, war and militarism are a driving force in the NASA reorganization. NASA officials have been instructed to coordinate their plans to develop a new launch vehicle with the Pentagon. In other words, the \$12 billion NASA budget is to become a component part of the drive to facilitate the maintenance and expansion of the US's preponderant military advantage, even beyond the confines of earth's gravity.

With the soon-to-be-scrapped Hubble telescope and the Galileo mission to the outer planets being notable exceptions, NASA's resources have been undermined by budget cuts and outsourcing, which have already resulted in the tragic loss of the crews of two Space Shuttles as well as an uncertain future for the orbital Space Station. If nothing else, the sudden redirection of NASA's priorities, vaguely and obscurely articulated, with dubious financial backing, and combined with the characteristic recklessness of the Bush administration, should give pause to future prospective astronauts.

When NASA officials donned their 3-D glasses two weeks ago to view the Martian landscape, they were, perhaps unwittingly, evoking a past in which both science and science fiction articulated for many a not-too-distant future in which humankind would expand its horizons beyond the confines of earth. But it is now more than 30 years since human beings set foot on the Moon, and American capitalism is far less capable today of fulfilling the promise and vision of the great advances in scientific research and space exploration than it was during the Kennedy era.



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