

NASA closes Goddard Space Flight Center library as it dismantles astronomy infrastructure

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On January 3, NASA closed the library at the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, the largest research library in the agency. The closure follows months of chaotic building shutdowns, laboratory dismantling and workforce reduction that have gutted one of the most important centers for space science in the United States.

The library housed over 100,000 volumes, including books, scientific journals and historical documents dating from the early 20th century through the space race with the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these materials have not been digitized and are unavailable anywhere else. NASA officials claim the holdings will undergo a 60-day review, with some materials stored in government warehouses and the rest discarded.

The shutdown is part of what NASA calls a facilities consolidation plan that will close 13 buildings and more than 100 laboratories on the 1,270-acre Goddard campus by March. The workforce at Goddard has been reduced from more than 10,000 to 6,600 through buyouts, early retirements and layoffs carried out under the Department of Government Efficiency campaign early last year.

Goddard has been central to NASA space astronomy missions for decades. The Hubble Space Telescope and James Webb Space Telescope were designed and built at the Maryland facility, along with dozens of others. The Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope (formerly the Wide-Field Infrared Survey Telescope), scheduled to launch in 2027, was also developed there, though funding for the project faces elimination under proposed budget cuts from the Trump administration.

Dan Weedman, who served as head of NASA Astrophysics from 1993 to 1995 and later as program director at the National Science Foundation, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the broader attack on space science infrastructure that the Goddard closures represent.

“The big issue is there’s no question it’s part of the intention to basically dismantle Goddard,” Weedman said. “And in doing that they’ll be dismantling most of our infrastructure for these space astronomy missions. They did the crucial engineering for Hubble and JWST, and they built the Roman

and they will be responsible for operating it. But I think that that’s probably the last big astronomy mission we’ll ever have, because the effort is moving toward privatized human space flight.”

Weedman also pointed to the budget trajectory for NASA astrophysics over three decades. “My last budget as the astrophysics division director, in actual dollars, was about the same as the astrophysics division today, about \$700 million a year. ... It’s an effective cut by like a factor of two or three, no question about it.”

Weedman also commented on the ongoing privatization of spaceflight: “And an interesting side line of that is just two weeks ago, or less, NASA announced the four groups that were going to start pursuing technology for what they hoped would be the next big observatory, which is called the Habitable Worlds Observatory. It’s just a dream. But the four were all industry. There was no university, there was no Goddard. It was four different industrial contractors. It is an example that they’re trying to move full steam into privatization, thinking that somehow it’s going to make things more efficient. It will certainly give some people big profits.

“The other thing about Goddard, which people just should appreciate is, those people are all civil servants. They never make big bucks. They aren’t in it for the money. They are in it because they love the science. I could cite specific individuals over the last 40 years who made incredible contributions and they were just fairly lowly paid civil servants at Goddard. They weren’t like the high paid professors in universities or the CEOs at the industrial companies. They were just working away mostly for the love of the science. That’s honestly something that’s across NASA and I’m sure that’s frankly something that’s an affront to the Trump administration is that you don’t go to NASA to make money.”

The library closure represents only one aspect of the infrastructure destruction taking place at Goddard. Earlier reports detailed the shutdown of laboratories and the removal of specialized testing equipment, including the ElectroMagnetic Anechoic Chamber, a unique facility essential for testing spacecraft antennas. Employees were given minimal notice to

empty buildings during the government shutdown when few workers were present on campus.

Dave Williams, the former director of NASA's Space Science Data Coordinated Archive, told the *New York Times*, "You can't just get these things online." Williams spent 30 years at Goddard as a planetary scientist before taking early retirement in 2025 and spent thousands of hours in the library researching historical mission data. He curated information from old scientific journals that could only be found in the library collection and uploaded it to online archives.

Williams also emphasized the importance of historical records for current space missions. "It's not like we're so much smarter now than we were in the past," he said. "It's the same people, and they make the same kind of human errors. If you lose that history, you are going to make the same mistakes again."

The library also served as a collaborative space where engineers, scientists and technicians gathered outside their laboratories. Building 21, which houses the library along with a cafeteria and offices, was permanently closed on January 3.

NASA Administrator Jared Isaacman, himself a billionaire, defended the closure, claiming it is part of a facilities consolidation plan approved in 2022 under the Biden administration. He asserted that materials would be digitized, transferred to other libraries or preserved for historical purposes, and that researchers would retain access through digital services and interlibrary loans.

The International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers disputed this characterization. "This was not part of some long-planned facilities consolidation as Isaacman claims," union president Matt Biggs said in a statement. "The Goddard Master Plan, written in 2022, does not call for the library's closure. Building 21, which houses the library, was scheduled for renovation not elimination."

Similarly, Senator Chris Van Hollen of Maryland condemned the closures at Goddard: "The Trump Administration has spent the last year attacking NASA Goddard and its work force and threatening our efforts to explore space, deepen our understanding of Earth, and spur technological advancements that make our economy stronger and nation safer."

Yet neither Biggs nor Van Hollen offered any perspective to fight against the cuts. The Trump administration has launched a frontal assault on science and art for the past year as part of the cultural component of establishing a dictatorship in the US. And as this conspiracy has unfolded, the Democratic Party has not fought to mobilize the population against Trump's efforts. Quite the opposite: the Democrats have collaborated to fund the administration, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and fought to channel the growing opposition into electoral channels.

The library closure follows the shutdown of seven other NASA libraries since 2022. Only three NASA libraries remain operational, at the Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, the

Ames Research Center in Mountain View, California, and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena.

The destruction of scientific infrastructure at Goddard echoes the losses that occurred when NASA contracted dramatically after the cancellation of the Apollo program in the early 1970s. The most notable casualty was the original analog tapes of the slow-scan television footage of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walking on the Moon. The existing footage had been converted to broadcast framerates through crude real-time converters that simply pointed studio cameras at slow-scan playback screens. The quality of the slow-scan originals was far superior, and for missions where those tapes survived, modern digital techniques have restored them with remarkable clarity.

The Lunar Orbiter missions provide a stark example of what was nearly lost. Imagery from the five missions was gathered photographically, developed aboard the spacecraft, and transmitted back through via analog video. For decades, the limitations of this process left the archive in degraded form. When the original slow-scan analog tapes were discovered just as they were about to be discarded, an unofficial independently funded effort, the Lunar Orbiter Image Recovery Project, assembled hardware to read them and process the data digitally. The restoration revealed imagery with dramatically improved spatial resolution and dynamic range, removing artifacts that had obscured details for decades.

The lost imagery from the Apollo missions serve as a lesson of the dangers of dismantling Goddard. Once materials are discarded or equipment is thrown away, the capability to recover information may be lost permanently. The hasty closure of buildings and laboratories during the government shutdown, with minimal time given to preserve equipment and materials, all but ensures that an irreplaceable scientific heritage will be destroyed.

The library closure is part of a broader pattern of cultural and scientific destruction under the Trump administration. Last year's general funding freeze, the closure of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, attacks on the Department of Education and potential cuts to research funding at the National Science Foundation all reflect the hostility of the ruling class to critical thought and scientific inquiry.

The transformation of NASA from a center of basic scientific research into a vehicle for private profit represents a fundamental assault on the collective knowledge and cultural achievements produced by generations of scientific work. The dismantling of Goddard threatens not only current space missions but the capacity of future generations to understand and explore the cosmos.



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