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UNDERSTANDING THE NEW U.S. APPROACH TO HUMAN SPACE FLIGHT

Abstract

On February 1, 2010, the White House announced new policy for human spaceflight that represents in several ways a radical change in the U.S. approach to sending people into orbit and beyond. The Constellation program that NASA had been pursuing since 2005 was characterized as “years behind schedule,” based on “technologies and mindsets of the past, and requiring “large budget increases to land even a handful of astronauts back on the Moon before 2030.” The White House proposed cancelling Constellation and replacing it with “a bold new effort that invests in American ingenuity to develop more capable and innovative technologies for future space exploration.” The effect of this proposal was to abandon the goal that had been set out in 2004 – to return humans to the Moon before 2020. The White House also announced a decision to extend operation of the International Space Station until at least 2020 and to make “commercially provided services the primary mode of astronaut transportation” to the ISS. The White House proposal has generated a great deal of controversy among the space industry, the U.S. Congress, and the NASA workforce. Over the March-September 2010 time period, its wisdom will continue to be debated. Some argue that the Constellation program should be preserved, and given the budget needed for its success. Others suggest that the U.S. private sector cannot successfully take on the responsibility of safely transporting humans to the ISS. Still others complain about the lack of a focused exploration goal to guide the development of new technologies. Advocates of the new approach counter that it will put “America on a more sustainable and enduring path for achieving its boldest aspirations.” This paper will explain and assess the strategic thinking that has led to proposing this new approach to human space flight. It will identify the benefits and risks associated with accepting the new approach, and compare those risks with the alternatives for moving forward suggested by those critical of the policy change. It will address the fundamental issue of whether the U.S. civilian space sector as now constituted is capable of embracing a very different approach to achieving space exploration goals. It will also discuss whether the new approach will be effective in persuading other countries to join with the United States in a global program of space exploration.