

Congress Defends U.S. Space Exploration

by Marsha Freeman

Aug. 3—Rising above party politics and parochial interests, both the House of Representatives and the Senate have handed a resounding defeat to the White House; to an Administration that asserts in private that the space program is a “waste of money.”

The Congress has declared its intention to halt the destruction of the nation’s leading science and exploration capability. But only with President Obama removed from the White House, will there be the possibility to embark on the multi-decade exploration of space that this country and the world require.

Over the past year, Congress has been battered into approving President Obama’s health-care “reform,” which will lead to the premature and unnecessary deaths of America’s most vulnerable citizens; and a financial “reform” bill that condones the growth of the financial cancer that is destroying the U.S. economy.

But when the President proposed on Feb. 2, that the United States, *as a nation*, end its 50-year commitment to grand accomplishments in manned space exploration, the Congress refused to acquiesce to an outright cancellation of the nation’s future.

The President proposed to end the Constellation program, which would develop a new crew vehicle and

family of rockets to bring astronauts to the International Space Station and then, later, to the Moon. Instead, the White House proposed, the country would bet the farm that the “free” market, ironically, heavily subsidized by Federal funds, would do the job.

NASA’s commercial space “guru,” deputy administrator Lori Garver, has claimed that the Senate’s NASA budget bill is a good compromise, which “keeps intact the most important parts of the President’s plan.” In fact, both the House and Senate bills assert that, no

matter what new space entrepreneurs may or may not develop, the *nation* will have a space exploration program, it will be funded, and future generations will benefit from it.

A Stinging Defeat

Bills to authorize NASA’s programs for fiscal year 2011, beginning Oct. 1, have passed both the House and Senate authorizing committees. The full House vote will take place in September; then, the House and Senate bills must be resolved in conference.

But Congress is not sitting and waiting. According to Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas), ranking member of the Senate Committee authorizing NASA’s budget, even though neither chamber has passed the NASA budget, “We are already working with the House leaders to reconcile the two versions of NASA legislation,” the *Houston Chronicle* reported on Aug. 1. If there is not a Federal budget for FY2011

come Oct. 1, but NASA’s authorization and appropriation bills have passed, even under a Continuing Resolution, NASA would be funded at the new, higher level.

More importantly, if uncertainty about the future of NASA is eliminated, and the Obama “reform” policy is universally defeated, many of the hundreds of aerospace workers who have been laid off, in the Administration’s attempt to do an end-run around Congress by



President Obama’s determination to shut down the manned space program has been under attack since Day One. Now, Congress has acted to rebuff this treason. Shown: A NASA astronaut works on the International Space Station, May 2010.

beginning to shut down the Constellation program, can quickly be re-hired, before this talent pool disappears.

The differences between the two bills are in the details, not in principle.

Both bills continue development of the Orion crew vehicle, to take astronauts to Earth orbit, and beyond. Both authorize the development of a heavy-lift rocket to go beyond Earth orbit, to begin development *now*. Both bills insist that Space Shuttle assets, and hardware developed for the Constellation program, be the basis of the continuing exploration program.

Both bills seriously cripple the Administration's "commercial" space subsidies, and propose numerous restrictions and caveats for any future private sector crew transport. Both bills add one additional Space Shuttle mission to service the space station, which itself is extended to 2020, and preserve the Shuttle workforce for as long as possible.

There will be no "reform" of NASA, to destroy a nationally-supported, multi-generational, mission-oriented frontier exploration program.

'Let Us All Live the Dream'

This action by the Congress was no emotional rush to judgment, despite complaints by some Representatives that they were taken by surprise. The Obama plan has been under constant attack since day one.

Nearly two dozen hearings were held in the House alone, to give the Administration an opportunity to defend its plan, and to hear from retired astronauts and aerospace and safety experts. Former Apollo mission commanders Neil Armstrong, Gene Cernan, and Jim Lovell characterized the proposed NASA "reform" as a "slide toward mediocrity."

Despite the best efforts of the White House to pit one NASA center, and, therefore, one Congressional district, against another, this effort failed. In fact, there was only one instance where voices were raised, during the months-long debate—and that was a fight among those who wanted the legacy of the Space Shuttle program to be located in *their* district!

This was not an argument over whether Houston or Huntsville would suffer the most layoffs. Or whether monies slated for NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland should instead be sent to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

During the July 22 discussion of the bipartisan NASA authorization bill, the most passionate debate in the House Science & Technology Committee involved

the disposition of the orbiters *Endeavour* and *Atlantis*, when the Space Shuttle fleet is retired next year. *Discovery* is already slated to go on exhibit at Washington's National Air & Space Museum.

Oregon Democrat, Rep. David Wu, who has *no* NASA or space program workers in his state, much less his district, objected to language in the draft bill that gave preferential treatment to communities with an "historical relationship with either the launch, flight operations, or processing" of the Shuttle, to obtain a retired orbiter. Cynics had predicted that since there is large representation from Texas and Florida on the Committee, Houston and the Kennedy Space Center would get special consideration, and that the amendment to level the playing field to obtain an orbiter, would fail. It passed by an 18-14 vote.

Motivating the amendment, Wu stated that although his state did not have the "opportunity to work on the Shuttle in the first place," there is great support for the space program in his state, and that people visiting a Shuttle orbiter in a near-by museum would be able to "have some participation in this dream" of space flight.

Rep. Charlie Wilson (D-Ohio), a co-sponsor of the amendment, added that Dayton, as the birthplace of flight, and home of the Wright Brothers, should have a fair shot at a retired orbiter. It was pointed out that no city should get preferential treatment, because "every single living human being has gained from the space program."

Although this provoked emotional responses from representatives whose districts include thousands of Shuttle workers, Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.), also from a non-NASA state, summed up the sense of the majority of committee members, and most Americans. Recently, he said, he took family members to visit the National Air & Space Museum. "Seeing the Mercury and Gemini capsules," Baird said, "takes my breath away."

The Obama "reform" of NASA is dead. Much of what still exists will be preserved.

But while this is a victory, in beating back an attempt to destroy what Americans have been most proud their country has accomplished over the past 50 years, it in no way puts the nation on a path to go beyond the bounds of what has already been done in exploring space.

That will take a change of personnel and policy in the White House, and an economic policy based on investments in great infrastructure projects, science, and technology.