

Militarization and The Moon-Mars Program: Another Wrong Turn in Space?

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The way NASA has started its new moon-to-Mars exploration program, the October 2006 White House announcement of a new national space policy, and subsequent statements by the State Department raise grave concerns about whether a new push to militarize space has begun. Events are pointing to an aggressive extension of U.S. supremacy beyond the stratosphere reminiscent of Reagan administration actions in the 1980s. Then it was the militarization of the space shuttle and the start-up of the Strategic Defense Initiative—"Star Wars"—which were gaining momentum until space weapons technology testing halted with the space shuttle Challenger disaster.

To date, the principal beneficiary of the moon-Mars program is Lockheed Martin, to which NASA awarded a prime contract with a potential value stated at \$8.15 billion. Already the world's largest defense contractor, Lockheed Martin's stock yielded an instant bonanza, rising more than seven percent in the five weeks following NASA's August 2006 announcement.

NASA is not paying the giant of the military-industrial complex \$8.15 billion to have people hop around and hit golf balls on the moon. The aim of the moon-Mars program is U.S. dominance, as suggested by NASA Administrator Michael Griffin's statements that "my language"—i.e., English—and not those of "another, bolder or more persistent culture" will be "passed down over the generations to future lunar colonies."

The first step will be a colony at the moon's south pole, described by NASA in a December 2006 announcement. According to Bruce Gagnon of the Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, "In the end, NASA's plan to establish permanent bases on the moon will help the military control and dominate access on and off our planet Earth and determine who will extract valuable resources from the moon in the years ahead."

NASA's plans appear to be a step backward to the Cold War perspective which the International Space Station (ISS) was supposed to transcend and is contrary to its original mission. NASA's 1958 authorization stated that, "The Congress hereby declares that it is the policy of the United States that activities in space should be devoted to peaceful purposes for the benefit of mankind." Fostering a 21st century race to the outposts of the solar system, which Griffin has likened to the armed scramble by European nations for colonies, would not appear to further the visionary goals for which NASA was created.

These goals were compromised by the words and actions of the Reagan administration in the 1980s and are being repeated today, as shown by the new national space policy outlined by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy.

At the landing of the fourth space shuttle mission by Columbia on July 4, 1982, nine months before his March 1983 speech inaugurating SDI, President Ronald Reagan told an audience at Edwards Air Force Base in California that a primary goal of the space program was to “strengthen the security of the United States.” A fact sheet issued that day said that the use of space “for peaceful purposes...allows activities in pursuit of national security goals.”

The language of the October 2006 White House announcement is similar, defining “peaceful purposes” in the use of space as including all “U.S. defense and intelligence-related activities in pursuit of national interests.” The announcement was amplified in a December 2006 speech by Undersecretary of State Robert G. Joseph, where he stated that “We reserve the right to defend ourselves against hostile attacks and interference with our space assets. We will, therefore, oppose others who wish to use their military capabilities to impede or deny our access to and use of space. We will seek the best capabilities to protect our space assets by active or passive means.” Joseph spoke at the George C. Marshall Institute, which had published a policy statement two months earlier entitled, “The War in Space Has Already Begun.”

The mixing of civilian and military priorities by NASA led to the Challenger disaster of January 31, 1986, an incident which showed how muddled motives and lack of candor in public programs can result in tragedy.

On February 9, 1986, almost two weeks after Challenger was lost, the *New York Times* published a series of explosive documents, including a memo I had written the previous July—and which I shared with *Times* science writer Phil Boffey— warning of a possible catastrophe from a flawed O-ring joint. Thus began a cascade of disclosures that included the account of how contractor engineers protested against launching in the cold weather and NASA’s past knowledge of the deficient booster rocket seals.

But it was not until after the presidential commission which investigated the disaster completed its work that I learned why NASA kept flying shuttle missions after the worst damage to date had occurred on the seals during a January 1985 cold-weather flight, a full year before Challenger blew up. It was because a launch commit criterion for joint temperature could interfere with the military flights NASA planned to launch for the Air Force out of Vandenberg Air Force base in California, where the weather tended to be cooler than in Florida. Many of these flights were to carry “Star Wars” experiments in preparation for possible future deployment of “third-generation” nuclear weapons, such as the x-ray laser.

Flying with the O-ring problem was but one of the design compromises made on the shuttle to accommodate the military. These began at the shuttle’s inception, when NASA abandoned a straight-wing design and agreed to a huge 65,000-pound capacity payload bay to launch military satellites. The shuttle orbiter also had to be as lightweight as possible, which accounted in part for the heat-shield tiles that have been so troublesome. This compromise contributed to the loss of Columbia in 2003 from a reentry fuselage burn-through that began with tile damage at liftoff.

The shuttle will stop flying after 2010. But the nationalistic tone of Griffin’s language about the moon-Mars program, combined with the gargantuan contract awarded to Lockheed Martin, the Bush administration’s 2006 space policy declaration, and the Air Force’s

“Strategic Master Plan for FY 2006 and Beyond,” which designates space as “the ultimate high ground of U.S. military operations,” sets the stage for another attempt to militarize NASA’s manned space activities.

These issues point to a flawed direction in U.S. space policy that calls for national debate. The U.S. could gain credibility by reversing its opposition to ongoing efforts at the U.N. to ban weapons in space. NASA has said, almost as an afterthought, that they are talking to other nations, including Russia, China, and India, about involvement in the moon-Mars program, but wouldn’t an honest intention to forego using future manned space activities for military purposes start with the kind of overt international agreements observed with the ISS?

Funding is also an issue. In ten years, \$100 billion has been spent by the U.S. on the ISS, a half-finished six-person workshop in low-Earth orbit, a cost which does not count the expense of shuttle flights to build and service it. Critics might say the money was “squandered,” since, according to Gregg Easterbrook writing in *Slate*, little of the promised private sector investment ever materialized. Meanwhile, NASA’s space science and aeronautics budgets have been drastically cut just to keep the shuttle and ISS aloft. Has Congress really determined what the moon-Mars program will eventually cost the U.S. government and what its impact will be on a budget whose deficits have again skyrocketed as they did in the Reagan era?

Perhaps it’s not NASA’s question to answer, but it should also be asked how we as a nation can be planning to spend hundreds of billions more to extend our imperial reach throughout the solar system when we cannot provide for our own people at home—when over forty-five million citizens have no health insurance, thirty-five million lack what USDA calls “food security,” the income of our middle class is in long-term decline, the city of New Orleans remains largely in ruins, the value of the dollar is plummeting, recession looms from deflating asset bubbles, and we must sell Treasury bonds to China to keep the doors of federal government offices open from one day to the next because, as stated in a July/August 2006 analysis published by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, “the U.S. government is, indeed, bankrupt.”

Addressing space policy concerns should now become an urgent priority of the new Congress.

Richard C. Cook was the NASA analyst who testified on the dangers of the solid rocket booster O-ring seals after the Challenger disaster. His book, *Challenger Revealed: An Insider’s Account of How the Reagan Administration Caused the Greatest Tragedy of the Space Age*, has been published by Thunder’s Mouth Press. Currently he is an independent writer and consultant, his website is at www.richardccook.com.

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