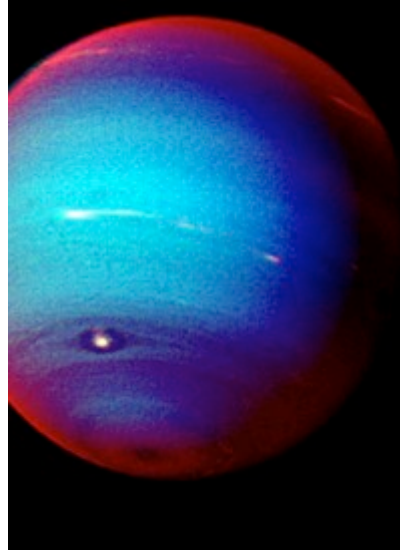




Written by [James Heiser](#) on August 21, 2009

NASA Committee Weighs Future of Manned Space Program

The U.S. Human Space Flight Plans Committee is also called the “Augustine committee” after Norman Augustine, retired chairman and chief executive officer of the Lockheed Martin Corporation, who serves as chairman of the committee advising NASA and President Obama on the future of U.S. manned space flight. [According to the committee’s website](#), the Augustine committee was announced by Obama on May 7 as “an independent review of planned U.S. human space flight activities with the goal of ensuring that the nation is on a vigorous and sustainable path to achieving its boldest aspirations in space.”



Now, nearly four months into the committee’s work, [an article at Wired.com](#) summarizes the committee’s findings: “The ‘60s are over, and no amount of artists’ renderings is going to bring back the *Apollo* days if NASA’s budget doesn’t get a big boost.... The Augustine committee’s preliminary judgments, which have been trickling out over the last several months, bring a measure of reality to NASA’s agenda, which suffered from a gap between the Bush administration’s big talk and limited funding. The truth, the panel has found, is that NASA doesn’t have enough money coming in to satisfy its stated goals of returning humans to the moon and eventually to Mars.”

The findings of the Augustine committee are hardly a surprise. The current NASA budget is approximately \$18 billion, of which roughly half is used for human space flight, including operating the space-shuttle program and the U.S. contribution to the International Space Station. This means that if the entire space program were simply cut (ignoring all of the attendant costs with such a maneuver) the savings would offset a mere four and a half days of deficit spending. Of course, the government *never* eliminates a bureaucracy, and even if the United States were to abandon manned space flight, it would simply signal an increase in unmanned programs, such as satellites and landers — and that is what some scientists are counting on.

Bob Parks, a University of Maryland physicist, told Wired.com: “They [astronauts] don’t do anything for us anyhow. Anything we can do, we can do it better, cheaper, and faster with robots.... And I mean cheaper by a factor of 10 to 100. Human beings are just not very good spacecraft.”

In the 1983 movie, *The Right Stuff*, the memorable phrase “No bucks, no Buck Rogers” is attributed to the astronaut Virgil “Gus” Grissom. The pithy expression summarized the simple fact that without funding, there could be no space program. Today, however, the phrase might easily be reversed: “No Buck Rogers? No bucks.” Human exploration is what has driven public interest in the space program — a point that has been emphasized by some of those experts who have been called upon to testify to the Augustine committee.



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A prime example of such testimony was offered on August 5 when Dr. Robert Zubrin, president of Pioneer Astronautics and president of the Mars Society addressed the committee:

Over the course of its history, NASA has employed two distinct modes of operation. The first prevailed during the period from 1961–1973, and may therefore be called the *Apollo Mode*. The second, prevailing since 1974, may usefully be called the *Shuttle Era Mode* (or Shuttle Mode, for short). In the Apollo Mode, business is conducted as follows: First, a destination for human spaceflight is chosen. Then a plan is developed to achieve this objective. Following this, technologies and designs are developed to implement that plan. These designs are then built, after which the mission is flown.

The Shuttle Mode operates entirely differently. In this mode, technologies and hardware elements are developed in accord with the wishes of various technical communities. These projects are then justified by arguments that they might prove useful at some time in the future when grand flight projects are initiated.

Contrasting these two approaches, we see that the Apollo Mode is *destination-driven*, while the Shuttle Mode pretends to be technology-driven but is actually *constituency-driven*. In the Apollo Mode, technology development is done for mission-directed *reasons*. In the Shuttle Mode, projects are undertaken on behalf of various internal and external technical community pressure groups and then defended using *rationales*. In the Apollo Mode, the space agency's efforts are *focused and directed*. In the Shuttle Mode, NASA's efforts are *random and entropic*.

In short, one might say that NASA's mission went from being in the line of Columbus, Lewis and Clark, the *Jeannette* arctic expedition, and almost countless other government-sponsored expeditions throughout American history aimed at exploration and settlement, to becoming a bureaucracy satisfied with going around and around in circles, both figuratively and literally.

In the words of the Wired.com article: "While the Obama administration might have to make the tough choice to end major human space endeavors beyond low-Earth orbit, space hasn't really been a major federal priority for more than 30 years, as military and health have eaten up a combined 80 percent of R&D [research and development] money. And the Obama administration hasn't telegraphed a major change in that stance."

NASA spending, of course, will go on and on, as will spending on every other agency in the federal budget; the Obama administration has made it abundantly clear by word and deed that they have never met a bureaucracy that they don't like. The question remains: What will the American people receive in return for their money — what do they want from their space program? Granted, the selective-deafness of the administration of Congress to the outcry of the American people regarding deficits, bailouts, and socialized medicine schemes have made it clear that they will not be listening to the people, but if they were to listen to the people, what would they hear? [A July 2009 poll](#) — timed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the *Apollo 11* moon landing — found that a clear majority (51 percent in favor, 43 percent opposed) in favor of sending astronauts to explore Mars. In fact, the support was strongest among American males under the age of 45, reaching 62 percent favoring such a vision for the space program. If the past centuries are any example, government-funded exploration from 1492 to the late 19th century opened new frontiers and private efforts soon seized the opportunities for freedom in the new frontier.



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