



NASA Prepares to Launch New Rocket for Manned Space Program

With the release of the full report by the Augustine Committee only days away, NASA is making preparations to test a rocket vital to a space program that the Obama administration may be preparing to terminate.

The U.S. Human Space Flight Plans Committee (also known as the “Augustine Committee” because of its chairman, Norman Augustine, the former president and CEO of Lockheed Martin) has [announced](#) that it will be releasing its final report on October 22 about the future of manned space flight; meanwhile, NASA’s Ares I-X rocket, which would be used in future manned space missions, is now secured on Launch Pad 39B at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. [According to NASA](#),

Managers will meet at Kennedy on Friday for a Flight Test Readiness Review to thoroughly discuss whether the flight test is ready to proceed and set an official launch date. Currently, Ares I-X is targeted to launch Oct. 27 at 8 a.m....

NASA’s first flight test for the agency’s next-generation spacecraft and launch vehicle system, called Ares I-X, will bring NASA one step closer to its exploration goals. The flight test will provide NASA with an early opportunity to test and prove flight characteristics, hardware, facilities and ground operations associated with the Ares I.

The Ares I-X launch is one step in realizing the plans of the Bush administration’s “Constellation” program, which proposed a return of human space flight to the Moon by 2020, with plans for manned exploration of Mars at a later date. The continuation of Constellation has been in doubt since President Obama’s decision in May to appoint a committee to evaluate the future of the U.S. program of manned space flight.

According to an Associated Press report (“NASA puts new rocket on launch pad for test flight”):

It’s the first time in 34 years that a rocket other than the space shuttle has stood at Launch Pad 39-B. NASA modified the pad for this rocket, which is supposed to eventually carry astronauts to the moon....

The test vehicle will blast off next Tuesday on a 2 1/2-minute ballistic flight to demonstrate how the partial first stage performs. It’s costing NASA \$445 million.

Thin and exceptionally tall at 327 feet, it looks like what will carry astronauts into orbit, possibly by 2015. But much of it is a mock-up, and no person or payload will be on board.



Written by [James Heiser](#) on October 20, 2009

The shuttle, by contrast, is 184 feet tall. The Saturn V rockets that carried men to the moon in the late 1960s and early 1970s were a record-setting 363 feet.

The uncertainty associated with the future of Ares and the entire Constellation program highlights some of the central difficulties associated with a government program of manned space flight. With multi-billion dollar programs being initiated, or cancelled, on the basis of presidential policy whims, the thought processes usually associated with rational business practices are simply thrown out. The decision to produce and launch hundreds of millions of dollars worth of space hardware, while simultaneously contemplating simply scrapping the entire process that led to the development of hardware in the first place because of a change in administrations could prove iconic of the unbelievable government expenditures of the past year. As Ares I-X rises from the platform, perhaps the last gasp of an endangered manned space program, the cargo-less launch of a \$445 million rocket may well summarize the first year of the Obama administration: a mind-numbing price tag, with very little to show for it.

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