



Written by [James Heiser](#) on April 8, 2011

SpaceX Plans Largest Rocket Since Moon Program

An American company is planning to build the largest rockets since the days of NASA's Apollo program, and promises to deliver payloads to orbit for a tenth the cost of the space shuttles of the U.S.'s troubled space agency. SpaceX has already successfully launch a smaller vehicle called the Falcon 9 on several occasions, but now the company has announced plans for a bold, new step in the development of private space flight.



The new rocket which SpaceX is planning to develop is called the [Falcon Heavy](#), and it will be powerful enough to send payloads as far as the moon or even to Mars. According to press reports, only the Saturn V booster, which was used during the days of the Apollo program, was larger than the Falcon Heavy. An article for the Associated Press compares the Falcon Heavy to several other launch vehicles:

The Falcon Heavy could put 117,000 pounds into the same orbit as the International Space Station. The space shuttle hauls about 54,000 pounds into orbit. The old Saturn V could carry more than 400,000 pounds of cargo.

The old Soviet Union had a giant moon rocket bigger than the Falcon Heavy, but it failed in all four launch attempts. Another Soviet rocket, also bigger than Falcon Heavy and designed to launch its version of the space shuttle, had one successful flight more than 20 years ago.

NASA is certainly among the most significant customers for SpaceX, but it is not the only customer. With SpaceX promising to reduce the cost of moving payloads to orbit — and beyond — the company's successful development of vehicle such as the Falcon Heavy offers prospects for an expanded role for private companies in space. The vision of SpaceX president Elon Musk is to break through the price barriers which currently limit access to space to a few governments and multinational corporations. As Musk told the AP:

Musk said Falcon Heavy will be far cheaper than government or private rockets. Launches are about \$100 million each. He said the Air Force pays two older more established aerospace firms about \$435 million for each of its launches. Over its 40 year design history, the space shuttle program has cost about \$1.5 billion per launch, according to a study by the University of Colorado and an Associated Press analysis of NASA budgets.

Musk, who has a contract to supply the space station with cargo using the smaller Falcon 9, said his pricing is more fixed than traditional aerospace firms. He joked: "We believe in everyday low prices." To get costs that low, Musk said he needs to launch about four Falcon Heavy rockets a year but plans on launching about 10. He doesn't have a paying customer for his first launch, but



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is in negotiations with NASA and other customers for flights after his company proves the new rocket flies.

A significant problem in the history of the “space race” has been, ironically, the limited number of flights; when only a few launches are planned, the cost of research and development is maximized. More launches means a production rate which — while not yet “mass production”— will certainly cut the cost of launching payloads to orbit and other destinations.



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