

Will Bush Wreck Manned Space Flight?

by Marsha Freeman

The American manned space program is facing one of its most serious crises of its 40-year history. Over the past six months, it has become clear that the International Space Station (ISS) is significantly over its projected budget—by more than \$4 billion over the next five years. But that is not the crisis.

In response to the cost overrun, the Bush Administration has mandated, and Congress has concurred, that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration will not be given any additional resources to complete the station as it was designed. Instead, it has proposed eliminating the U.S. emergency crew return vehicle and habitation module, which are needed to increase crew size from three, to the full complement of seven. Without the full crew, little science will be done on the station, which is the primary project mission. Without a full crew, it is unlikely that astronauts representing the international partners, particularly Japan and Europe, will ever get to fly. The NASA fiscal year 2002 budget bill, which has passed both Houses, went so far as to *remove* \$75 million in funds from the station account, to “teach NASA a lesson.”

On Nov. 14, three days before NASA Administrator Dan Goldin was scheduled to leave the space agency, the White House announced that Office of Management and Budget Deputy Director Sean O’Keefe would take his place. O’Keefe, who is close to Vice President Dick Cheney, and whose expertise is in “management,” stated on Nov. 7 at a House hearing that OMB will not support increased funding for NASA, and that “technical excellence at any cost is not an acceptable approach.”

There are multiple causes for the cost overruns in the space station program. They were enumerated in a report released on Nov. 2, by the Independent Management and Cost Evaluation Task Force, headed by former NASA and industry executive Thomas Young. But the fundamental cause for today’s overruns, was yesterday’s refusal to fund the station at the level required.

The Task Force reports that when the station was redesigned in 1994, “annual budget caps of \$2.1 billion were levied on the program as a means to control costs.” The result was that “basic program content slipped and the total program cost grew.” At a Nov. 2 briefing at which the Task Force report was released, Young stated, “Caps may make you feel good for a while, but it is the worst way to manage a program.” The assembly sequence was continually stretched out, and

now a decade of deferred costs has come home to roost. Overall, NASA’s spending power is two-thirds what it was a decade ago.

The Young Task Force recommendations are no cure for the disease, but are tailored to reduce costs to try to make up the shortfall. The report complains that NASA has had too much of a focus on safety and engineering, and should be concerned with accurate cost accounting!

In mid-October, NASA presented its preliminary FY 2003 budget, which reflected the priorities of White House budgeteers, for the consideration of NASA’s Advisory Council. Goldin warned that layoffs at NASA field centers were under active consideration, as part of the transfer of national space assets, such as wind tunnels and the Space Shuttle program, to universities and the private sector.

This was immediately attacked by Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), who compared such a proposal to the Pentagon handing over control of its forces to an outside company to fight a war. Nelson, who flew on the Shuttle in the 1980s, countered that the White House should increase NASA’s budget to cover the costs, and that Congress should approve the increases.

In an interview with *Space News* on Nov. 8, Goldin stated that for the FY 2003 budget, policymakers have three options: “consolidating” some of the agency’s ten field centers (1,000 layoffs have been mooted), eliminating some of NASA’s missions, or increasing the budget.

Other Complaints

During a hearing on the ISS’s status before the House Committee on Science on Nov. 7, letters addressed to the U.S. State Department, from Canada and Europe, were made public. They voiced the international partners’ concern about the Bush Administration’s proposal to downsize the ISS.

The Canadian letter, dated Oct. 31, recommends that a senior-level diplomatic meeting be convened as soon as possible, to deal with the crisis. The Nov. 2 European letter reminded the State Department of U.S. obligations under the international agreements, which, it states, are “unambiguous.” The letter expressed “considerable concern,” because the European science laboratory, and most of its \$4 billion investment, will have no purpose without a seven-man crew.

During the hearing, Rep. Dave Weldon (R-Fla.), whose district includes the Kennedy Space Center, stated that the Bush Administration is “slowly killing space exploration,” and that although it is the “budgeteers” who are responsible, “in the end it will have President Bush’s fingerprints on it.”

Weldon backed the international partners, stating, “For years, we, the United States, lambasted the Russians for their poor level of cooperation. Now we look very hypocritical.” In fact, one year ago, the Republican Speaker’s Advisory Group’s report, “Russia’s Road To Corruption,” attacked the Clinton Administration’s handling of U.S.-Russian space cooperation, citing the “Russian’s government’s failure to meet its commitments.”