

ASTRONAUTS ASK CONGRESS:

Does America Want a Real Space Program, or Not?

by Bonnie James

The future of U.S. space exploration and human space flight was the subject of a hearing of the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology Sept. 22 (see below for excerpts from the transcript). For anyone who lived through the Presidency of John F. Kennedy and the Apollo years that followed, the testimony of astronauts Neil Armstrong (Apollo 11) and Eugene Cernan (Apollo 17) was both powerful and deeply poignant. Their remarks, as well as those of former NASA administrator Michael Griffin and Prof. Maria Zuber of MIT, dramatically highlighted the inevitability that, as a result of the distorted priorities of previous administrations—but especially those of the current Obama Administration—we will soon see the final nail hammered into the coffin of America’s leadership in space, unless there is an immediate shift away from Obama’s science-killing policies.

This testimony has the power to awaken among the younger generations, the inspiration to fight for a future in space; it is crucial reading for every American.

Sharply contrasting the “been there, done that” attitude of the Obama White House to that of the “can-do” approach of President Kennedy, Cernan reminded the members of the Committee: “JFK did not just challenge us to go to the Moon—he believed it was time to take a leading role in space—a role he thought might well hold the future of our nation on Earth. . . .”

In an unmistakable swipe at the Obama Administration, Cernan added: “We need an Administration that

believes in and understands the importance of America’s commitment to regaining its preeminence in space—an administration, which provides us with a leader who will once again be bold—just as JFK was—and challenge our people to do what history has now told us is possible. . . .”

While the Democrats on the Committee were mostly silent, perhaps because they understood that the unspoken subject was the criminal neglect of the space program by the leader of their party, the Republicans, for the most part, while offering eloquent lip service to their love of space exploration, and respect for its “heroes,” harped on the “reality” that the funds just aren’t there for space, and that the “solution” is commercial space flight. Fortunately, they were effectively challenged by the witnesses on both counts.

Griffin put the issue most succinctly, when he stated, “The central issue to be decided by our nation’s leaders at this time, is simply this—do we want to have a real space program or not?”

The answer to that question, which came up repeatedly during the course of the hearing, bears most heavily on the younger generations, as the veterans of the 1960s and ’70s retire and pass from the scene. As Cernan put it, “People have spent 50 years learning what they didn’t know they didn’t know, are turning that experience over to this new enthusiastic young group. And the question you ask is, how do we keep them? We’re losing them in droves.”



NASA

Astronaut Neil Armstrong was the first human to walk on the Moon (shown here, July 21, 1969). As Gene Cernan noted, “Neil’s name is the most known name in the universe . . . for a reason. He’s a human being. He can come back and tell you what it feels like, what it looks like, what it was like to be there.”

At another point, Cernan reminded the lawmakers, “We did not join NASA to build—to design windmills and rebuild brake pedals for some other country. We joined NASA to do something unique and different than our parents, and grandparents, and aunts, and uncles did.

“This is the key to the future—are those young people. . . .”

‘Budget Is a Real Thing Here’

California Republican Dana Rohrabacher, a notorious budget hawk, was the most blunt in his questioning of the “costs” of the space program. “Budget is a real thing here,” he blustered. “We believe in vision and dreams, but we have to rely on budgets or those dreams and visions will never come into reality. . . .” He then demanded of Griffin, “How much does it cost for a shuttle flight? We’re talking about a billion dollars, aren’t we?”

A billion dollars? What percentage is that of the trillions that have gone to bailing out Wall Street?

As Armstrong noted, “The severe reductions in space activity have caused substantial erosion in many critical technical areas and are creating negative economies of scale, cost increases throughout the aerospace industry. . . . Our choices are to lead, try to keep up, or get out of the way. A lead, however earnestly and ex-

pensively won, once lost, is very difficult and expensive to regain.”

Later in the discussion, Cernan placed the issue in context: “You’ve got to have somebody, a Commander-in-Chief who is giving the orders to move forward, to believe and commit himself and understand that this is one of the most important things this nation can do to maintain its leadership. . . .

“No one understands what a half-percent of our budget is, but people understand that we’re spending more money to feed the cat and dog in this country, than it’s going to cost me to support the space program. . . .”

The only Democrat to speak in the hearing, other than Ranking Member Eddie Bernice Johnson, was Rep. Jerry F. Costello (D-Ill.), who addressed the “cost” issue: “I would repeat Captain Cernan’s question: How can we afford *not* to do it? What is the value of U.S. leadership? That’s the question to be answered—not what the cost is.

“If the U.S. fails to lead in space, it is unimaginable to me that we will remain a leader on Earth, and I submit that the cost of that is far higher than the NASA budget many times over.”

Manned/Unmanned?

Another discussion that ran through the hearing was the question of manned, versus unmanned space flight. Cernan, who was the last human to walk on the Moon, answered it this way: “Neil [Armstrong]’s name is the most known name in the universe, you said that—the world, the universe—for a reason. He’s a human being. He can come back and tell you what it feels like, what it looks like, what it was like to be there. Lewis and Clark didn’t send an empty canoe up the river.”

Near the end of the hearing, Cernan beautifully summed up why we must go back into space: “Tell your kids and every other kid you ever see, tell them the guys who went to the Moon said, ‘Oh, we’ll shoot for the Moon, because even if you miss, you’re going to land somewhere among the stars.’ That’s all they need. That’s all they need to foster their dreams.”

Yet, there is something more that they need, if we are to ensure the future for the next generations: We must rid ourselves of the mentally unstable occupant of the White House, and Congress must pass, with all deliberate speed, the Glass-Steagall bill (H.R. 1489), so that funding of space and other urgent programs can begin again.