

November 30, 2009

Don't Let U.S. Lose Leadership in Space

By Rep. Ralph Hall (R-Texas)

There is a lot at stake for the future of human spaceflight. Forty years ago America became the undisputed leader in space when we successfully landed on the Moon. This feat inspired a generation of scientists and engineers who helped solidify America's position as the world's leader in high-tech innovation. Today, America's space agency faces some difficult decisions. NASA will soon retire the Space Shuttle, but has yet to complete the next generation vehicle. The gap will result in reliance on Russia to ferry our astronauts to and from the International Space Station (ISS), a situation that raises a host of concerns.

Without our own vehicle to access the ISS, America risks losing its position of leadership in space. The ISS represents the culmination of the greatest engineering project perhaps in human history, and the U.S. has led in this effort. The gap in spaceflight capability *must* be minimized, and we must accelerate development of the follow-on system.

However, before evaluating the best way to move forward, perhaps we should first reflect on how we've arrived in this position.

In the aftermath of the Columbia tragedy, America did some soul-searching. The Columbia Accident Investigation Board (CAIB) concluded that there was a "failure of national leadership" that contributed to the accident and to NASA's inability to finish earlier programs deemed as hoped-for replacements for the Space Shuttle. The CAIB encouraged Congress and the White House to clarify our goals in space. I was encouraged in early 2004 when the Administration unveiled the Vision for Space Exploration, giving the Space Agency clear direction and measurable goals. NASA was directed to complete the ISS and to develop a capability to fly beyond low Earth orbit, allowing us to return to the Moon and eventually pursue a "flexible path" of exploration through the solar system. Giving NASA a clearly defined destination and the clearly defined design requirements that go with it will help ensure long-term success.

The CAIB also acknowledged that human spaceflight is a risky endeavor and said that "the design of the system should give overriding priority to crew safety, rather than trade safety against other performance criteria, such as low cost and reusability." I couldn't agree more that crew safety must be a top priority when developing any new launch system.

After the Vision was announced, Congress held numerous hearings to review the Constellation program proposed by NASA, and in the end agreed with the goals and architecture of the plan. It is important to note that both the 2005 and 2008 NASA Authorization Acts reflect broad, bipartisan, bicameral support from Congress for the

elements of that original vision. But unfortunately the funding necessary to fully achieve this vision, along with NASA's many other missions, has been inadequate. I have said many times before that for too long NASA has been asked to do too much, without the proper funding. This lack of funding has led us to where we are today.

Congress has a strong desire and need to minimize the gap. Independent American access to the ISS is a strategically important national imperative. The best way to achieve this is to accelerate development of the Orion Crew Exploration Vehicle and Ares 1 Crew Launch Vehicle. Significant progress has already been made in developing these capabilities, and to abandon that progress would be a step backward. In support of that position, last year Congress authorized an additional \$1 billion above the President's FY 2009 NASA budget request to accelerate the development of the Constellation system.

Another proposal that some Members of Congress believe could help NASA during the gap is to foster a commercial cargo delivery service to the ISS. However, it is important to note that Congress did not endorse a commercial crew option as an appropriate solution for the U.S. to meet our responsibilities and commitments to our international partners. A commercial crew capability simply could not be properly evaluated and ready in time to safely fly our astronauts during the gap. The commercial crew demonstration initiatives in the NASA Authorization Act were not intended to supplant development of Ares 1 and Orion. As I said, astronaut safety must be the top priority. After the Space Shuttle is retired, NASA will still be required to provide crew rescue capabilities for ourselves and our international partners from the ISS. The Ares 1 launch vehicle and the Orion capsule are being designed with these goals in mind.

The Obama Administration should currently be putting the finishing touches on the fiscal year 2011 budget that will be submitted to Congress early next year. I urge the President to request adequate funds so that NASA can maintain its leadership role in space. Without this leadership it will be difficult for Congress to appropriate the necessary funding. We must be mindful of our federal budget and direct taxpayer dollars to priorities that generate the greatest return on our investment. Our space program has possibly contributed as much or more than any civilian government program to securing America's technological and economic leadership in the world. The plan Congress authorized is one worthy of a great nation.