



## Viewpoints, Outlook

### **Opportunity, challenge in keeping spaceflight alive**

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It is often difficult to break through the public policy deliberations in Washington. The extensive health care debate has consumed a great deal of the oxygen. Yet surprisingly, or perhaps not, concerns about the impact of the Obama administration's budget proposal for our nation's human spaceflight program have gained significant traction. The decision to end the Constellation program is not the direction in which NASA or our nation should be headed.

In Houston it's impossible to miss the overwhelming support for human spaceflight. You can't go far without feeling its presence: The Johnson Space Center and the thousands working on behalf of its mission are important symbols of the ingenuity and spirit that embody America. That sentiment is also pervasive in Alabama and Florida, homes of the Marshall and Kennedy spaceflight centers, respectively. The work done at these centers has largely inspired many of the technology and math careers that America desperately needs to support a highly skilled work force. They also motivate important research and development in related areas across the nation.

Moreover, every state in America has small and midsize businesses that are vital to space exploration. Every state has hospitals that use technologies developed by NASA to help save and improve lives. And in every state there are students who gain inspiration from our astronauts' journeys and pursue careers in science, technology, math and engineering. By abandoning American exceptionalism in the area of human spaceflight, the budget jeopardizes all those things.

But the upcoming budget battle also raises an opportunity to make the case to Congress about why this program matters. There are only four shuttle flights left before the United States loses its independent access to low Earth orbit. After that, the U.S. will have no means to get humans to space, and our only alternative will be to pay the Russians more than \$50 million a seat to get to the International Space Station — which is, ironically, overwhelmingly funded by the U.S. Without Constellation, the gap will increase exponentially, and we will lose our global dominance over Russia, China and India. These nations are not backing off on their investments in human space exploration.

I'm not telling Houstonians anything we don't already know, but our message must be repeated and spread far and wide. Local organizations like the Bay Area Houston Economic Partnership, the Greater Houston Partnership, and our local leaders led by Mayor Annise Parker are also reaching out beyond Houston and Texas to convey what we have accomplished, what we are doing and, most important, what we can achieve in human spaceflight. I know that in Alabama and Florida, industry employees, supporters and space enthusiasts are also making the case for Constellation. In fact, it is tremendously encouraging to see people in places outside these states making their voices known, telling the White House and Congress that this is a national priority that must be supported.

In working on this issue in Congress, I see this outpouring reflected by the bipartisan support that is emerging from all parts of our country for human spaceflight. Republicans and Democrats alike are expressing support for maintaining Constellation and asking the tough questions of NASA and the White House. I am approached daily by members of Congress on both sides of the aisle asking how they can help with this fight. Each day we increase our support.

Many in America doubted we could put a man on the moon when President John F. Kennedy first posed the challenge. Some may question if we will be successful in this mission now. I am confident that America's global leadership in human spaceflight is worth this fight, which we will win.

*Olson, a Republican who represents the 22nd Congressional District of Texas, is the ranking minority member on the House space and aeronautics subcommittee.*