

## White House distances itself from NASA chief's Muslim comments

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WASHINGTON -- The White House on Monday distanced itself from comments made recently by NASA chief Charlie Bolden, as spokesman Robert Gibbs said a key goal of the space agency was not outreach to Muslim nations.

"That was not his task, and that's not the task of NASA," Gibbs told reporters.

The rebuke comes as critics have attacked Bolden for telling the Arabic news network Al Jazeera in June that one of the top three priorities assigned to him by President Barack Obama was to "find a way to reach out to the Muslim world."

Anger has grown in recent days, with former NASA Administrator Michael Griffin telling the *Washington Examiner* that it was a "perversion" of NASA's mission to "make the Muslim world feel good about its contributions to science and mathematics." Other critics have compared this to Obama's desire to cancel the over-budget Constellation moon-rocket program as an example of the president's misplaced priorities for the nation's manned-space program.

The reproach from Gibbs -- who said Bolden misspoke -- was the harshest criticism yet from the White House, which last week issued a statement agreeing that NASA should "engage with the world's best scientists and engineers."

Indeed, Bolden's interview with Al Jazeera was not the first time the retired Marine Corps general has touted a better relationship with Muslim nations as a NASA goal. In February, he told a group of engineering students that NASA was looking at increased connections with "non-traditional" allies.

"We really like Indonesia because the State Department, the Department of Education [and] other agencies in the U.S. are reaching out to Indonesia as the largest Muslim nation in the world. We would love to establish partners there," Bolden said then.

At the time, the sentiment garnered little attention, other than criticism from U.S. Rep. Bill Posey, R-Rockledge, who said on the House floor that the Obama administration should instead focus on finding jobs for American aerospace workers.

"Am I the only one that thinks there's something wrong with this picture?" Posey said.

Since taking office, Obama has touted the need for increased international cooperation in space

and other areas. But Bolden's recent comments seem to have struck a nerve because he said outreach was a "foremost" goal of the agency.

"Third, and perhaps foremost, he [Obama] wanted me to find a way to reach out to the Muslim world and engage much more with dominantly Muslim nations to help them feel good about their historic contributions to science and engineering," Bolden said.

The dispute is the latest source of stress for the White House when it comes to NASA.

Since February, Obama and Congress have deadlocked over what to do after NASA retires the space shuttle next year.

The White House wants to use commercial rockets to ferry astronauts to the International Space Station so that NASA engineers can concentrate on building futuristic spacecraft in coming decades. But many members of Congress want to continue the Constellation moon rocket program that has already cost taxpayers more than \$9 billion.