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BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO THE DEBATE OVER HUMAN SPACEFLIGHT

COMMENTARY

May 4, 2011

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Last week, NASA and the National Air and Space Museum held a [conference](#) that commemorated key milestones in human spaceflight (HSF) over the past 50 years. The meeting was truly a breath of fresh air. The discussion gave a new spin to a topic – the future of the U.S. HSF program -- that in the last two years has become sorely predictable, based on the repetition of old paradigms that may not make sense for where the United States and the world are today.

Conference participants broached a broad range of topics that often featured a questioning of some of these assumptions, particularly the applicability of the frontier analogy to capture the spirit of HSF, and the “space race” paradigm as a must-have for a robust HSF effort.

Taking up the former issue, James Spiller reminded us that aligning the Cold War HSF program with the American expansion to the West – the opening up of the frontier – was in no way inevitable or natural, but that it made sense with the anxieties and sensibilities of the time. This of course forces the question of whether the frontier analogy is still compelling 50 years later or whether it may have a counterproductive effect on those it is supposed to capture today. In a similar vein, a striking but important conclusion was reached by Ashok Maharaj who questioned the benefit of India adopting the space race paradigm in its recent quest for an indigenous HSF program. Maharaj argued that China is just too far ahead for India to catch up in this respect, and, more importantly, that starting late has its advantages because India can learn from past mistakes. Thus, Maharaj said, India ought to dispense with the idea of racing China in HSF altogether and pursue such activities for its own ends.

These points are particularly relevant for today's discussions here in the United States, where stakeholders have a hard time letting go of these two paradigms. The elements of hardship, risk and manifest destiny are almost inevitably implied in renewed talks of space as the next frontier, regardless of the fact that these may no longer resonate today. At a time when limited budgets and interdependence between actors creates new opportunities for cooperation, talking about U.S. HSF efforts as a “solo” American venture in line with a nationalist spirit seems, at best, anachronistic. It was positive for the space program to align itself with such sentiments then, since the United States did engage in a space race with the Soviet Union. Yet, as John Logsdon pointed out at the conference and in his new book, *John F. Kennedy and the Race to the Moon*, this too was a choice: Kennedy pushed for space cooperation with the Soviet Union up until his assassination, but the Soviets were not interested at the time. Kennedy's successors

apparently considered the alternative to a race to be not popular then and it is not now. For some, not having a race is a major part of the problem facing the U.S. HSF program today, which is why rumors of a race with China tend to come up. Regardless of what key stakeholders say from either side of the world, the assumption goes: if it worked then, it must work now.

Two of the main points transmitted throughout the conference though were that context means so much in these issues and that, up to a point, there is always a choice made about how these programs take shape and what sentiments drive them.

As the discussion continues about the direction of the U.S. HSF program, the space community ought to take a step back first and figure out what the context is today and where space fits into the larger picture. Instead of a feature of inertia, if either of these Cold War paradigms survives, it should at least result from a discussion about how they make sense today. Questioning old assumptions does not mean we end up throwing everything out of the window; the discussion may prove that some paradigms are still relevant today, even as others are put to rest. At the very least, engaging in this exercise will imbue the debate over HSF with new life.