

IT'S MORE THAN A 90-DAY JOB

EDITORIAL
August 7, 2009

By Marcia S. Smith

The one message that came through loud and clear at the August 5 public meeting of the Augustine panel is that they need more than 90 days to do justice to their task. The fate of the human space flight program is at stake.

The panel is facing a dizzying array of choices as it tries to narrow its options down to the three or four that will be presented to the White House and NASA.

Panel member Ed Crawley publicly began the winnowing process at the August 5 meeting and his Powerpoint [slides](#) show the tip of the iceberg. As discussion within the panel that day revealed, however, each of his seven scenarios comes with nuances and caveats that make the real trade space substantially bigger.

Panel chair Norm Augustine has explained that under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), panel debate must take place in public. Apparently this does not apply to smaller groups of panel members and through the August 5 meeting most of the discussions were within the subgroups that reported at the July 28-30 public meetings. Presumably they are continuing now as the panel prepares for its final public meeting on August 12.

Polite conversation has characterized the exchanges in public sessions. It is difficult to imagine that a group of 10 highly talented and experienced individuals with such a broad range of perspectives will so easily reach consensus. One must wonder when the more spirited, even confrontational, debates will be held to fully illuminate the complex issues involved. Such debates often consume a lot of time, which the panel lacks. Its report is due to be released publicly on September 1 and will have to be briefed to Administration officials and Congress before that.

One area where strong views appear to be held by at least some panel members is the degree to which the commercial sector should be relied upon for crew transportation to low Earth orbit (LEO). The option to "let NASA off the hook" and rely on commercial companies to transport astronauts to and from the International Space Station has been widely discussed in the space community for several months. NASA's Constellation program itself raised it as a possible alternative to the current Constellation architecture according to earlier Augustine panel briefings. Notionally, this would free NASA to focus on the more challenging goals of sending humans beyond LEO.

Listening to the August 5 debate, it certainly seemed that Jeff Greason and Bo Bejmuk, both with experience in the commercial launch sector, think a significant role for the commercial sector

should be championed. It is difficult to ascertain how many of their colleagues agree. It is a tempting option, but has a number of drawbacks. Commercial companies need to make a profit. Is there sufficient market to assure a company of a profit without assurances from the government that it will purchase a specific number of flights? If the government must provide those assurances, will the government really save any money? What would happen if the company went bankrupt or opted out of the business?

This one issue of commercial involvement in human space flight deserves extensive debate. Then there are all the other issues. As the clock ticks, the biggest question is whether it is appropriate for the future of the U.S. human space flight program to be decided in just 90 days. As superlative as the members of the panel are, they are not miracle workers, and the NASA and Aerospace Corporation experts supporting them can only do so much to develop useful cost and schedule estimates in an ultra-compressed environment.

Only time will tell how much influence the Augustine panel has in the long term, but it undoubtedly will have significant impact on near term decisions. One can only hope that the report that is issued in the next couple of weeks in actuality becomes an interim report to satisfy the FY2010 budget debate. The panel's term should be extended to provide sufficient time for thoughtful, analytical judgments to provide a sound foundation for determining the future of the human space flight program.