

MISSING THE MARK

EDITORIAL
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It is easy to become swept up in the enthusiasm of the new leadership team at NASA and the reverie of the 40th anniversary of Apollo 11. Blogs and newspapers have been full of opinions about the past, present, and future of NASA, especially whether Charlie Bolden and Lori Garver have what it takes to turn the agency around.

Even the redoubtable Keith Cowing on [NASAWatch](#) is waxing philosophically about NASA as the new team takes the helm. A long time observer and often critic of the agency, his *NASA's Second Chance* post today is well worth reading whether or not you agree with his premise that Ares is the root of the problem.

But these commentaries all seem to miss the mark. They are commentaries on **NASA**. What can NASA do? What should NASA do? Why can't NASA be better than it is? How will Charlie and Lori fix NASA?

NASA is the wrong target. Granted, the agency is not perfect, as repeated cost overruns on various projects amply demonstrate – and the new leadership team must get a grip on that. But the question of whether NASA is achieving the goals that America wants should be aimed at the President of the United States and the indecisive (according to polls) American public that he represents.

The past week of op-eds and articles about the state of the human space flight program 40 years after Apollo 11 would lead one to think that NASA has spent the last four decades twiddling its thumbs and getting thick around the waist while guzzling beer in the back yard.

Not true. NASA has spent the last 40 years doing what it was told to do – build and operate the space shuttle and (albeit much more slowly and at much greater cost than expected) build a space station – while waiting for the signal to advance beyond low Earth orbit once more. The starting gun has fired twice: in 1989 and in 2004. Unfortunately, the occupants of the Oval Office in each of those cases did not follow through with requisite funding and political muscle to ensure those efforts bore fruit. Today we are still in low Earth orbit.

Mike Griffin points out that when he took office, the projected budget runout for Exploration allocated \$113 billion for lunar return by 2020. NASA designed a program to

fit that cost; remaining within the allocated cost profile was a matter to which enormous attention was focused. By the time President Obama released his proposed budget for FY2010, the budget allocated to lunar return had dwindled to little more than \$70 billion.

While Dr. Griffin and others publicly chastise the Office of Management and Budget for reducing the funding, the fact is that if the Oval Office wanted OMB to do something differently, OMB would salute and follow the President's direction. Whether President Bush was acquiescing to OMB's reduction of NASA funding or simply indifferent to NASA's fate after January 2004 is not the point. If he had wanted NASA to have the funding needed to execute his Vision, his OMB Directors would have known it and directed their staff to put the money in the Administration's budget requests.

Thus, one should not be looking to Charlie Bolden and Lori Garver to change the situation. Change must come from the Oval Office.

That raises the question of what will happen to the Augustine panel's report. They have been instructed to present options, not recommendations. Who then will pick an option and run with it?

Charlie Bolden cannot be the one to decide what NASA should do. Nor can he quixotically quest for the funding needed to do it – the NASA Administrator does not have that kind of clout without visible backing from the White House. John Holdren, the President's Science Adviser, cannot be the one either. OSTP does not have the power within the Executive Office of the President to instruct OMB on how to allocate funds. OMB follows the President's lead. If the President puts his weight behind a decision, OMB will "make it so."

The fate of the human space flight program – indeed, all of NASA's activities – is in the hands of President Obama. Administrator Bolden and Deputy Administrator Garver cannot spin straw into gold. Congress can add funding but only on a year-to-year basis. Programs cannot be designed based on the hope that Congress will be able to eke out an extra billion or so every year. As the adage goes, hope is not a management strategy.

The worst outcome of the Augustine effort would be the status quo – where NASA continues to be tasked to do too much with too little. The ball is squarely in President Obama's court. If he wants the inspirational space program he keeps talking about, he needs to make certain that the country, Congress, and his OMB Director knows that it is a priority and not expect that NASA magically will find a way to do it alone.

Alternatively, if President Obama does not care enough about the space program to adequately fund it, let's find that out now.