

David Wang
STS.092

The Ups and Downs of Money and Manned Flight

The tragedy of Columbia's break up over Texas on February 1st will no doubt slow down the already retarded progress of manned space flight, but will most likely not stall the program as occurred following the loss of Challenger. The reasons easiest to examine all revolve around funding, however the upcoming congressional review, Bush's funding initiative, the future of the ISS, and the military's Assured Access program are the important facets.

The first congressional review of Columbia occurs Wednesday, February 12th. And as that date of nears, Sean O'Keefe, NASA Administrator, has gotten increasingly and understandably less open about his opinions concerning recent clues into the disaster. The review is believe to not only deal with Columbia, but the overarching question of whether or not NASA's budget cuts have led towards operations in the red line. Congressional aides have commented that questioning might be directed towards the use of funding on an already several billion, cost over-run, international space station. But, whatever specifics may be asked, the review already has a different ring than the investigations following the loss of the Challenger 17 years earlier. Instead of mismanagement and laying blame, it appears that the review will target spending decisions both within NASA and federally. Whatever the avenue of questioning, it seems unlikely that it will detrimentally tip the scale against the manned space program.

It seems further unlikely that the program will be scrapped in the presence of Bush's promises for increased funding and continued space exploration, specifically assisting the shuttle program with a funding increase from 3.2 to 3.9 billion. If public morale is to stay high enough to push through a war plan, it is doubtful that any cuts will be made in an agency that was seen as an icon of American progress. This might be the reason that despite the initiation of the presidential review of U.S. space launch policy, Bush still pushed for the increased funding to cover cost over-runs. Bush's support may make moot the problems the Congressional review has currently with NASA's funding.

Yet, even if the funding for the manned space flight continues and is increased it is still premature to believe that the extra money will be spent expanding manned space flight through creating a next-generation shuttle fleet or a mission to Mars. Of the 3 shuttles remaining, Discovery has flown in 30 missions, leaving it available for at least 70 more flights before it is put out of service. In light of that, the increased funding will most likely be targeted at completing the lower cost OSP (Orbital Space Plane) in replacement of the Soyuz for ISS docking and maintaining the current shuttle fleet for continued operations up until at least 2015.

What about our multi billion dollar investment in the ISS? It won't be cut. At this point, it seems more likely that the review within NASA concerning the final configuration of the ISS as projected funding gets thin, will push for a minimal operating ISS. So far as maintaining the space station goes, the less cost effective, but cheaper per launch, Soyuz, crew and Progress, cargo, vehicles seem like the most viable way to go for the moment.

Unfortunately, anti-proliferation treaties make U.S. funding of the construction of more such vehicles impossible. Although Russia maybe able to sustain the ISS with the help of the ESA, it is certainly not an endeavor that can be done without a U.S. Manned space program.

And the last facet to consider in the continuation of the manned space program is the ending of the “Assured Access” policy adopted by the Defense Department. Under Assured Access, the department of defense chose to fund Lockheed and Boeing in the development of single-use rockets for placing their cargo into orbit. Current cost cuts aim at removing one of the launch vehicles, putting in jeopardy the defense department’s “assured access” to space. In the last couple of months there have been increased talks about once again using the shuttles to launch military satellites following the decoupling of the two agencies after 1986. If it is the case that the US military will renew its interest in civilian manned flight, with our increased military budgets, the space program may live on forever.

The conclusion of this network of causes and effects will be the continuation of the manned space program. Gone are the days of Apollo, when competitive ambition drove exploration. Today the future of manned space flight rests haphazardly in the hands of global politics and the clutched fist of US finances, a shadow of Kennedy’s dream carried on by those that need it rather than those that believe in it.