

**Lester L. Lyles, General USAF (retired)**  
**1703 Burlwood Court**  
**Vienna, VA 22182**

May 7, 2010

The Honorable Frank R. Wolf  
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Commerce,  
Justice, Science, and Related Agencies  
House Committee on Appropriations  
Capitol Building, H-309  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Wolf,

We write in connection with President Obama's proposed FY2011 budget for NASA, which includes both provisions to restore and re-invigorate critical investments in space science and technology and provisions for revolutionary changes in the nation's human spaceflight program. Our recent experience as the Chair and Vice-Chairs for the National Academies report, "America's Future in Space: Aligning the Civil Space Program with National Needs," has given us opportunities to reflect on the strategic issues represented by this change of direction in the context of the report, and we wish to share our personal views with you. As Congress debates the future of U.S. human spaceflight, we believe it is crucially important that decision makers ensure that a balanced space program results, which in all its dimensions – exploration, science, technology development – truly serves the national needs.

You are well aware that the administration's proposal to cancel the Constellation has drawn outcries from those who are either directly affected by the cancellation of Constellation or who view this action as too vaguely defined, too risky, or even an abrogation of U.S. leadership in space. It is important to note, when considering those concerns, how many cries of alarm preceded theirs, when large portions of NASA were sacrificed to fund Constellation. NASA has been under-funded and asked to do too much with too little, ever since President Bush announced his Vision for Space Exploration, which led to the development of Constellation. When Constellation had priority, NASA, within its constrained budget, had to jettison all of physical science research in microgravity, much of space life science research, any effective utilization of the International Space Station (ISS), which was to be de-orbited in 2016, much of NASA's aeronautics program, and most of its advanced space technology development program; and NASA's program to study the Earth from space, which is essential for understanding and predicting global climate change, was left on the verge of collapse.

The result of the emphasis on Constellation at the expense of other key activities was an agency that did not serve all aspects of the nation well. We no longer live in a Cold War environment, where leadership in space is measured solely by human spaceflight or where inspiration comes mainly from the exploits of astronauts. Rather, today, we should demand a civil space program that provides for the protection of Earth and its inhabitants through the use of space research and technology; provides leadership in science by seeking knowledge of the universe and searching for life beyond Earth; provides technological, economic, and societal benefits that contribute solutions to the nation's most pressing problems; as well as expanding the frontiers of human activities in space. And through the sum of all these activities NASA will enhance U.S. global strategic leadership and be an inspiration to our people.

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The proposed FY2011 budget for NASA goes a long way to restoring the essential portions of NASA: the ISS is to be continued and used; the Earth science program is to be restored; space science is supported and aeronautics research is enhanced; and of particular significance, NASA is funded to be an engine of cutting-edge technology development again, with the promise it holds for sustaining U.S. leadership in space and for providing immediate societal benefits.

This time the pendulum has swung the other way. The proposed funding for NASA grows, but in large part, the funds to restore the under-funded programs of NASA come from the cancellation of Constellation, which is to be replaced by largely undefined programs in which astronauts are to be ferried to the ISS on commercially developed launch vehicles and more advanced technologies are to be deployed to extend the human presence into space.

It makes no more sense to have a NASA with an under-emphasis on human spaceflight than it did to have a NASA with an over-emphasis. The strategic leadership of the United States in a rapidly evolving globalized world, the economic well-being of our people, and the sense in our society that our future is promising, all require a NASA that has breadth in science and technology, and accomplishments in both robotic and human spaceflight.

The burden of proof thus now lies with Congress and NASA to define and to develop a human spaceflight program that does not re-inflict damage on the breadth of NASA's activities and that serves the nation well. It is possible to do this.

It is our hope that all who recognize that a vibrant civil space program is essential to the nation's future will come together and use this opportunity to define and to fund a NASA that through the breadth of its activities and its accomplishments truly befits a great nation.

Sincerely,



Lester L. Lyles



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