

The Politics of Space

By J. Brian Phillips

For the past two years, newspaper columnists, politicians, and the American public have repeatedly called for the formulation of a national space policy. In mid-February, with the release of the 1989 federal budget, the Reagan Administration attempted to do this. Among other things, the budget commits NASA to a \$700 million, five-year lease on a private orbiting laboratory. This policy is designed to encourage private sector involvement in the development of space.

Founded in response to the Soviet launch of Sputnik, NASA has been a politically controlled organization since its inception. Through the years intra-NASA competition, Presidential politics, Congressional pork-barreling, and public opinion have shaped America's space policy, and therefore, NASA's budget and its policies. Whatever the particulars of that policy at any given time, America's space program has remained a government monopoly, and consequently, subject to the vagaries of the political process.

The "new" space policy announced by the administration hardly changes any of this. Certainly, private businesses will become more involved in space activities, but as long as the investment for these activities is controlled by Congress, ultimate control of America's space program remains vested in Congress. And if history is to teach us anything, it is that that program will be subject to change every year.

The solution is to divorce politics from the process by completely privatizing America's space

program. NASA's role should be limited to defensive military applications.

Despite the talk of encouraging the private sector, the government itself remains the primary obstacle. **Donald K. "Deke" Slayton**, President of Space Services Inc., recently told a Texas State Senate committee: "It doesn't matter what the president says or what Congress says the space policy is. The problem is there is some civil service guy with a certain set of rules to follow and nothing can be done until those rules are changed" (*Houston Chronical*, 2-29-88). Consequently, government bureaucracy, not technology or financial resources, is the real barrier.

Admittedly, the private sector has had difficulty raising capital for space ventures. But this can be largely attributed to the uncertainty surrounding the nation's space policy, as well as bureaucratic and regulatory morass that must be traversed. Reducing regulations and encouraging competition will greatly reduce the financial requirements. Furthermore, businesses can pool resources, or use older, proven technology. Given the opportunity, the private sector will find a way to reduce costs.

Under the present policy arrangement, i.e., determined and implemented by the government, our space program is necessarily monolithic. If that program fails, the nation is left without a space program. The two years since Challenger has demonstrated this. A free enterprise space policy will result in a diversity of programs, as different companies pursue different goals. If one program fails, there are many other alternatives.

If America truly wants a long-term space policy, an unregulated, privatized space industry offers the only hope. Nature, not Congress, should determine the limits of what we may do in space. Individual initiative, encouraged by free enterprise, developed the American frontier. American entrepreneurs can do the same in the final frontier—space—but only if we allow them.

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(Reader comments are invited, ED.)