

The Hon. Frank R. Wolf
Testimony to the House Science, Space and Technology Committee on the
Space Leadership Preservation Act
February 27, 2013

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to discuss our bipartisan legislation, the Space Leadership Preservation Act.

In the 10 years since the tragic Space Shuttle Columbia accident and the decision was made to transition to a new human spaceflight system, NASA has had 3 different administrators and 2 completely different shuttle replacement programs.

And that's just in *the last decade* at NASA.

Because NASA's human spaceflight plans were, yet again, abruptly altered at the start of the Obama Administration, the United States will now be without a shuttle replacement until at least 2017 – more than 6 years after the retirement of the space shuttle.

Recognizing that we have a serious problem at NASA, I included language in the FY 2012 Commerce-Justice-Science Appropriations bill that required the creation of an independent panel to review NASA's strategic direction. The National Research Council was selected for this task and formed a committee last year charged with reviewing NASA's strategic direction. They produced a good report and hope this committee will keep their recommendations in mind as it develops the authorization bill this year.

It don't think it will surprise anyone on this committee, or the American people, to know that the NRC report released late last year found that NASA currently has no strategic direction -- a problem that has been significantly exacerbated with the cancelation of the Constellation Program, which would have returned American astronauts to the Moon.

Unfortunately, it's now abundantly clear that this abrupt termination has thrown the U.S. space program and industry into turmoil -- and made NASA an agency and workforce adrift.

If you were to ask any NASA employee -- astronaut, scientist or engineer -- what the agency's top mission or goal is, you would get a confused look and dozens of possible answers.

The Moon?

An asteroid?

Mars?

Or is NASA now simply a “technology development” funder, as this administration sometimes suggests?

I think we can all agree that it’s hard to make progress towards *any* goal if we don’t know where we’re going -- much less when and how we’re supposed to get there.

The American people deserve better.

And that’s why we have reintroduced this bill. I believe the reforms contained in this legislation represent an important step to fix the chronic political and programmatic instability that has plagued NASA over the last 20 years.

It’s clear that the cycle of program cancelations following the start of each new administration come at great cost to the taxpayers and grinds any progress made towards one human spaceflight system and mission to a halt.

By the time each administration terminates the last program and gets its favored new strategy in place, years are lost and billions of tax dollars have been wasted.

And each time this happens the American people are no closer to having the world-class space exploration program they deserve.

Over the last several decades, we may have had the luxury of idling in this cycle as each new administration scrapped and replaced programs. However, in the 21st Century, we face new challengers in space for the first time since the Apollo program in the 1970s.

For example, over the last 15 years the Chinese military has embarked on a steady and successful effort to build a human spaceflight program, rivaling steps only the U.S. and Russia have accomplished during the latter half of the 20th Century.

Some may scoff and proclaim that the Chinese will never catch up with us. And this might be true if we hadn’t squandered so many years scrapping and replacing exploration programs. But here we are.

I would also add that the Chinese haven’t been shy about stealing our sensitive technologies to help themselves jump the line even faster.

So today, while the U.S. still maintains a clear lead in space, we can no longer take that lead for granted.

In fact, I expect that this decade will be the “make or break” moment for American leadership in space.

Maintaining our leadership in space is critical because space remains the ultimate “high ground” for our national security. It also has significant impact on our economy and competitiveness.

But equally important -- when you are the leader in a field, you help set the norms and standards for that field.

Given the profound security implications of space, I believe we all want to make sure the U.S. remains the leader in space so we can lead the international community in setting responsible norms and standards for the use of space.

The international community will also seek to join with the perceived leader in space for the exciting exploration programs it may not be able to afford or accomplish by itself.

While we have the resources to go it alone on many exploration programs, we can better strengthen our alliances with responsible countries that share our values by leading exploration missions.

Notably, the NRC committee found that no country shares the current administration’s interest in going to an asteroid. Instead, they all want to join an effort to go to the Moon.

So the U.S. can either lead that effort, or another country will step up in our absence -- which would be very unfortunate.

The first step is admitting we have a problem with “business as usual” at NASA. That much is clear.

The next step is identifying reasonable solutions, which we have tried to do in this bill.

The reforms in this legislation draw on the “best practices” of other federal agencies:

- The six-year term for the administrator is based on the six-year term of the director of the National Science Foundation. It will ensure an administrator’s term spans two administrations and will make sure that the person is in office long enough to be held accountable for long-term projects and programs.
- The board of directors is based on the National Science Board, which provides leadership and some political insulation for the National Science Foundation.
- The direct budget submission to Congress is based on other independent agencies, like the Legal Services Corporation, to provide a more complete picture than OMB may want to share.

And if we make these changes, I believe the odds of American maintaining its preeminence in space for the 21st Century will dramatically improve.

There is no question that NASA is in need of a stable, independent and strategic leadership structure that can ensure the long-term, strategic planning necessary while still remaining accountable to the Congress and the President.

I know the NASA workforce and contractors are capable of doing great things and delivering an exceptional space program for the American people -- but they need sustained and stable leadership.

Thank you again for your consideration and I urge the committee to advance this legislation.