

Space Policy: No Lift-Off

A new policy on space exploration was scheduled to appear in the President's State of the Union Address on 25 January, but its launch was aborted and delayed for more than a week.

Several journals reported that the President would set out his plans that evening, and the White House scheduled a gala press briefing the next morning at 11 o'clock to go over the details. Four high-level officials, including the administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the secretary of transportation, the secretary of commerce, and the secretary of the Air Force, were lined up to speak.

In the event, the President made no mention of space policy and the press conference was called off.

According to NASA, the President signed his name to a new policy in general terms, but the legislative package that accompanied the State of the Union Address makes only passing reference to the initiative. The details, which remain unsettled at this writing, have not been released.

The delay was caused, Capitol Hill aides say, by a conflict between NASA and other agencies over the requirement that NASA help a private company launch a capsule for industrial space research and provide most of the financial and technical support to get the project started.

Less controversial elements of the policy, observers say, would provide \$100 million to begin a \$1-billion "Pathfinder" program at NASA aimed at developing technology for a manned base on the moon and a trip to Mars; \$1 billion next year for the manned space station; emphasis on space science and technology in educational programs; and a series of administrative steps designed to accelerate commercial investment in space.

The small research capsule, called the Industrial Space Facility (ISF), is the brainchild of Maxime Faget, a former NASA engineer and designer of the space shuttle. Faget is founder and chief executive officer of the Houston-based Space Industries Inc. For a fee, the company will provide clients with a specified amount of workroom and electrical power in outer space. Faget's company has secured a ride on the shuttle in 1992 and has been promoting its project as a humble "pioneer's shack" on the frontier, as contrasted with NASA's space station, which is called a "fort." Preliminary estimates put its 5-year cost at around \$700 million, as compared with \$14.6 billion or more for the space station through 1996. Although the ISF is supposedly a private venture, at least 70% of its capital will come from NASA in the form of a government lease.

Congress endorsed the project in the continuing resolution last Christmas, asking NASA to set aside \$25 million for it this year. The ISF has been promoted also by the Commerce Department and by the President's Economic Policy Council, which is chaired by Treasury Secretary James Baker.

NASA administrator James Fletcher objected to Congress's plan in a letter to the Senate Appropriations Committee on 6 January, saying it was unwise because NASA "does not now have identified needs that would justify a major commitment . . . and the hoped-for industrial customers have not yet come forward." The leaders of the relevant appropriations subcommittees in the Senate and House fired back a response on 21 January, accusing Fletcher of rejecting all ideas but NASA's own plan for a permanently manned station. "The problem always comes back to believing that the goal must *first* be a permanently manned facility. This is both unfortunate and short sighted," the congressmen wrote. They pointed out that the ISF could be used as an interim research facility and test bed for equipment to be used on the larger station in the late 1990s.

Understandably, NASA is not eager to pay for something it views as a threat to its manned station. Nor is it ready to relinquish some authority over scheduling space research payloads, as would be required in a new regime being considered by the White House, according to *Air Week & Space Technology*.

Thus, until some strong institutional conflicts are resolved, the new space policy may remain in limbo. Only the President, it seems, will be able to work out a solution, and he may have to work it out—dread the thought—in specific detail. ■

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Manned Spaceflight Fails Peer Review

London

An influential committee of Britain's House of Lords, arguing that manned spaceflight is likely to remain "an expensive as well as a hazardous diversion" for the foreseeable future, has indicated that it would like to see plans for the U.S. space station delayed. However, if the space station does go ahead, "Europe is right to participate," the committee says.

It also expresses strong opposition to attempts led by France to put Europeans into space independently of the Americans, arguing that the costs involved would directly threaten the overall scientific and commercial prospects for space. In particular, the committee says that Britain "should play no part in Hermès," the small space plane currently being developed by the remaining 12 members of the European Space Agency (*Science*, 18 December 1987, p. 1645).

These comments are made in a report on U.K. space policy published last week by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, whose members include several prominent science administrators such as Lord Dainton, the former chairman of the Council of Science Policy.

The committee criticizes the British government for refusing to increase the amount of money Britain spends on the exploration and exploitation of space. Steering a course between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who has proposed that the space budget be kept to its current level, and the British National Space Center, which has argued that it should be tripled, the committee suggests that spending on civilian space activities be increased from \$200 million to \$360 million over the next 5 years.

In particular, it recommends that Britain should agree to participate in both Columbus—the proposed European contribution to the U.S. space station—and the development of a man-rated version of the launcher Ariane. The European Space Agency has given the British government until 10 February to decide whether it is prepared to participate in either of these projects, for which almost all other members of the agency have already signed up.

The committee, which is usually listened to closely by the British government, also warns that cost escalations in Europe's new space technology programs could mean that no money would be left to exploit the research opportunities that the new space-based experimental facilities opened up. ■

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