The Role of Private Enterprise in Putting Man into Space - Part 2

By Thomas Sullivan

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In February 2003, the relatively recent break up of the Space Shuttle Columbia upon reentry into the atmosphere is another example of critical information not percolating upward to the proper people within NASA. The destruction of Columbia during atmospheric reentry was due to the development of a hole in the forward section of one of the wings. This hole was caused by foam breaking off of the main fuel tank during the launch phase. The break off of foam from the main fuel tank during launch had occurred many times on previous shuttle launches, and this was known within the NASA community. It just happened that during those launches, the foam did not damage any critical structure.

Eventually this problem caught up with NASA. Information pertaining to the problem of foam departure I believe was also filtered out within the NASA bureaucracy. It either appeared as non-critical to the decision makers, or it never reached the right people. In either case, certain people within the bureaucracy structure did not think foam departure was a critical issue. Did those astronauts that died know about the level of foam departure on previous flights? Sadly, we will never know the answer to this question.

In private enterprise, safety issues which arise will be known by most members of the organization. These issues will not have to pass through several layers within a bureaucracy. To put it bluntly, NASA uses to many people in order to get man out into space. A government bureaucracy is not suited for exploring space. A government bureaucracy is suited for mail delivery, not space exploration.

In private enterprise, which is non-bureaucratic by nature, a relatively small group of people are working toward a common goal. By nature, private enterprise is leaner, smarter, and non-monolithic. It has to be in order to compete within the market place. Information passes more easily between parts of the organization, and waste full unnecessary spending will not fly within a private enterprise.

NASA depends on it's contractors to deliver a high level of safety. A private enterprise depends on itself to provide a high level of safety. The structure of a private enterprise is more suited to the endeavor of sending out explorers into space. The government should award grants to the most promising companies with the understanding that the sending out of explorers into space does indeed benefit mankind.

Americans are at their best when they compete. Competition is an integral component of American society. What was the driving force that put us on the moon? It was the competition with the Russians. At the present moment in time, this type of intensive competition does not exist. Although, it does appear as if China may be a future competitor. China has already stated that they want to put a man on the moon. If China truly attempts to get a man to the moon, I believe that would be the shot in the arm NASA needs to awaken it from it's slumber.

I believe most American's have the competitive mind set that we should not lose at anything,

whether it be in the Olympics or sending a man back to the moon. Americans need to compete to accomplish something. It is competition which drives the advancement of technology. But can we afford to wait until a competitor steps into the arena? In reality, China is at least fifteen years away from sending a man to the moon. China needs to develop space walking and docking techniques, and this takes time. Do we need to wait at least fifteen years or more for China to become a competitor so that NASA can then kick into high gear?

Why not let companies within the realm of private enterprise compete for start-up funding from the government. Once they produce a viable service, they can compete among themselves. Let the research and development occur within these companies, and most importantly let them compete. These companies can have the same characteristics of any company that wants to produce a viable product or service. They will not be under contract from NASA and will operate as a separate private enterprise entity.

We have already seen that there is a demand for what space companies can offer to the general public. Many well-to-do people with plenty of money to spend, will pay for a ride into space. Jim Branson's company Virgin Galactic, will locate its world headquarters and Mission Control in New Mexico. The State of New Mexico will build a $200m spaceport. The first flights are planned to begin in 2008. They are now starting to take reservations and deposit commitments for the first year of operations.

The Virgin Galactic ticket price has been set at US$200,000 and the minimum, fully refundable deposit to secure your spaceship seat is US$20,000. I believe over time, competition within the market place will cause this price to go down. They already have a waiting list of paid customers, and the space port has not even been built yet. The government can help these type of companies get started, and the service these space companies produce will sustain them and allow for further growth.

A company can make money from space tourism and the same company can be involved in sending explorers out into space. A company can be involved in space tourism, exploration, and can provide a research and development platform. Government grants can be awarded based on how strong the potential exists for space exploration and research. The federal government can provide funding for the research and development platform, just as it does for other areas of research which benefit mankind. This I believe is the future of man's endeavor into space.

Man will be exploring the cosmos with private enterprise being the driving engine. If one enterprise fails, one of the competing enterprises will win out. Sure there will be some disasters and risks will be taken because that is the nature of the business. But when unfortunate disasters or mishaps do occur, the private enterprise engine will not grind to a complete halt.

Mojave Aerospace Ventures (MAV), a company founded by Paul Allen and Burt Rutan, have taken the first steps toward this archetypical dream of exploring the cosmos, and they did it with a fraction of the budget that NASA uses and with a team of 130 or so people to boot. The MAV team won the Ansari X-Prize by sending a man into space and returning him safely to earth and then they repeated this within two weeks.

The Ansari X-Prize was an unadulterated competition between different teams around the globe, and it was a display of what can be achieved when different groups compete for a single prize. What the MAV team accomplished was unbelievable given the facilities and resources which were available to them. The MAV team won the Ansari X-Prize within a society where freedom and democracy are regarded as a right to all individuals. The United States is such a society. It is the government's responsibility to protect this democracy and freedom. It is not the governments responsibility to send man out into space.

Burt Rutan has said that he has never worked a day in his life. He only plays. His passion for his work is what produces results. Burt Rutan and his team represent the core of what makes the United States the greatest country in the world. MAV has shown the world what private enterprise can accomplish.

Even if MAV endeavors never go beyond earth orbit, they have taken the first step within the proper mind set and culture, and this is what will put man into the cosmos. This mind set and culture of pure unadulterated intellectual curiosity is what really will put man into the cosmos. Not NASA's mind set of fear.

NASA has failed to put man out into cosmos. But NASA is only as good as the American people who support it. Lets not forget that it is the American tax money which pays for NASA. For NASA to do it's job, it has to be sufficiently funded. The problem is, NASA spends way to much money to get the job done. Will the American people continue to support NASA? It's time the American people either fish or cut bait. If the United States wants to be a leader in the future in terms of space exploration, it has to pay for it with money and yes, lives. If the American public can not back NASA, then the only alternative is space exploration within the realm of private enterprise. Profit coupled with man's need to explore will most likely be the driving engine which sends man into the cosmos.

I believe the United States must follow a new course, one which is distinctly different from the path it has followed. The United States will be a leader in terms of space exploration and I do not believe it will fall by the wayside and let some other country fulfill this role. The United States can get back to it's foundation of innovation and exploration which after all, is what has made America one of the greatest countries in the world. I believe we will be the first back to the moon, and yes, we will be the first to step on Mars. If NASA is not capable for whatever reason, companies within the realm of private enterprise will find a way.

NASA has played it's important role by lighting the torch in sending man to the moon. We are now at a point in the history of mankind where that torch should be passed to private enterprise. God has placed the planets and all the stars within the universe there for a reason. It is God's intention for us to move outward into the final frontier. We do this to fulfill the natural curiosity that God has given us, and in the process we better the lot of mankind. Lets go...

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