President Trump Needs to Go to the Moon

by **Michael Singh (/experts/michael-singh)**

Aug 11, 2017
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/alryys-tramb-yhtaj-aly-aldhhab-aly-alqmr)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Singh (/experts/michael-singh)
Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.

Articles & Testimony

A successful return to the Moon could serve as a stepping-stone for a manned mission to Mars or even more ambitious goals.

In just two years, the United States will celebrate the anniversary of the *Apollo 11* Moon landing, an event that perhaps more than any other represents the American will and capacity to achieve the seemingly impossible. This year, however, we will celebrate a less auspicious anniversary -- in December, it will have been 45 years since the last man set foot on the Moon, ushering in a long era of diminished American ambitions in space. In recent years, presidential administrations have debated whether Americans should return to the Moon or set their sights on Mars.

But as President Donald Trump devises his strategy for space exploration -- which he has described as "essential to our character as a nation...our economy, and our great nation's security" -- he should reject this choice as a false one. To sustainably reinvigorate our human spaceflight program, we should use the Moon as a stepping stone to Mars and beyond, while spreading costs and spurring innovation by maximizing opportunities for commercial and international involvement.

While most U.S. government activities in space, and the lion's share of the space budget, are focused on military programs, human spaceflight remains the program's lodestone. Every president in recent memory has sought to stir the popular imagination and -- hoping to channel JFK -- associate himself with big, bold thinking by announcing ambitious goals for manned spaceflight.

For President Barack Obama, that goal was sending men to Mars by the 2030s. He dismissed President George W. Bush's goal of returning Americans to the Moon, stating that we had "been there" (and presumably done that). He canceled Bush’s Constellation spacecraft program, replacing it with the Space Launch System (SLS). The SLS would be the United States' heaviest-ever rocket, meant to send humans farther than ever before.

Yet the reality of America's manned space program has been more pedestrian than presidential rhetoric would

suggest. NASA's budget has been essentially flat since the 1990s. The United States has lacked the capability of putting an astronaut in orbit since the last space shuttle flight in 2011, instead buying seats on Russian Soyuz flights. And while we are quietly living through a golden age of space science -- our **unmanned probes (https://www.space.com/37722-mars-rover-curiosity-five-years-anniversary.html)** have returned spectacular images and invaluable data -- our manned missions have been limited to flights back and forth to the International Space Station, due to be decommissioned in three years.

Obama wasn't the first to call for manned flights to Mars. President George H. W. Bush articulated a similar plan, which envisioned placing an American astronaut on the Red Planet by 2019. But Congress blanched at the price tag, and the plan was shelved. Today, just as then, the technical challenges of reaching Mars might be less daunting than the challenge of devising a political and budgetary path for reaching new frontiers in space.

Achieving our next big human spaceflight breakthroughs will require more than a stirring speech; it will require a plan designed to be sustainable over the long term by maximizing public support while minimizing the burden on NASA. Today, funding for NASA represents just 0.5 percent of the federal budget, compared to over 4 percent at the height of the Apollo program; there will be no return to those levels.

A realistic plan would not abandon the idea of a manned mission to Mars, but would aim first to return humans to the Moon for prolonged periods. A return to the Moon offers several advantages. Most obviously, it can be accomplished faster and at less cost than a straight shot to Mars. And while it involves considerable risk, the shorter distance and our own prior experience means that risk will be lower than with a Martian voyage.

What's more, the costs and risks of a mission to the Moon can be shared with international partners. Even as we have turned our focus to Mars, the European Space Agency, Japan, and others have taken an increased interest in manned lunar missions. A renewed focus on the Moon would significantly enhance our opportunities for international collaboration and burden-sharing, and would also prevent Russia or China -- both of which have their own lunar aspirations -- from supplanting us.

A shift in NASA's focus to the Moon could also be accompanied by a greater role for private firms in low-earth orbit. The commercial space industry has developed at a rapid pace since the United States last penned a vision for space exploration. Any new space strategy should seek to capitalize on these developments by shifting more routine tasks (a relative term in space operations, to be sure) to private operators while freeing NASA to focus on higher-end activities focused on the Moon and deep space.

If we were successful in returning humans to the Moon, it could serve as a stepping stone for a manned mission to Mars or even more ambitious goals. Practically speaking, lunar missions would provide astronauts with experience in extended habitation of an alien world. The Moon even holds the potential for eventually serving as a staging ground for missions further out. Just as importantly, successful lunar missions would likely invigorate public and political support in the United States and overseas for space exploration, helping to sustain the attention and funding required for future steps into space.

President Trump has promised to restore "America's proud legacy of leadership in space." If he is to make good on that pledge, he must address not only where we are going but map out how, amid declining budgets and competing priorities, we plan to get there.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. ❖

Foreign Policy

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)