Space program's greatest risk? Believing NASA

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It seems the shuttle is too expensive to fly past 2010. Or too risky.

That's interesting.

I recall former NASA director Sean O'Keefe telling me the shuttle was good to go until 2030.

The shuttle's life span seems directly correlated to how long NASA wants to fly the shuttle.

Obviously, NASA doesn't want to fly it much longer. The agency's once-beloved space plane is eating up money that could be spent going to the moon and Mars. The older it gets, the more money it munches.

So the agency is undercutting those in Congress who want flights to continue.

I can't judge shuttle safety. But I am skeptical of NASA risk assessments. And this wouldn't be the first time it mixed risk and politics.

After the Columbia disaster, NASA deemed it too risky to fly a Hubble repair mission. If launch debris damaged the orbiter, there would be no safe haven at Hubble, as there is at the space station.

Some key members of Congress protested. NASA reassessed the risk. Lo and behold, the Hubble repair mission is back on. Meanwhile, during the August launch of Endeavour, a chunk of debris left a deep 31/2-inch gouge that had NASA engineers fretting over repairs.

Risk is relative in the world of NASA. There is the risk of exploding shuttles. And there is the even greater risk of imploding budgets.

To understand how NASA games the latter, look at the space station.

When NASA needed the station to keep its budget fat and its shuttles flying, it promised grand scientific discoveries at a discount price. The money flowed out of Washington and into key congressional districts.

Over time the cost skyrocketed, and expectations soured. But billions already had been invested. So there was a battle between those in Congress who wanted to stop the bleeding and those who only saw jobs in their districts. The station barely survived.

A similar dynamic played out on the shuttle program. By the time Challenger exploded in 1986, exposing horrendous flaws in the space plane, it was too late to turn back. So they built another one.

So now we have these two boondoggles weighing NASA down as it seeks to move on to the moon and Mars -- because that is where the next budgetary pot of gold can be found. True to form, NASA hopes to dump as much money into this new toy as quickly as possible, hoping to reach that point of no return.

The rush is understandable. George W. Bush soon will be gone, leaving us more than $9 trillion in debt and with a Medicare system scheduled for bankruptcy in 2019.

So now we're going to spend billions going back to the moon and probably a trillion going to Mars?

How would you justify this?

NASA's past performance?

Here is a better idea: Forget the moon. Forget Mars.

NASA sold us a space station, and it should deliver one, complete with all the research capacities NASA promised. That's where it should put its resources for the next 10 years, salvaging value out of that shell.

Instead, the agency now is blowing off the $1.5 billion Alpha Magnetic Spectrometer, which scientists from 16 countries have spent a decade building. It's supposed to go on the space station, but NASA doesn't want to pay for the shuttle flight.

The spectrometer has been called one of "the most significant science projects of our time."

Isn't this the type of research NASA promised when pushing the station? All of which shows NASA's promises are about as believable as its risk assessments.

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