

Congressional Leader's Push Helps Deliver NASA Funds

Project Prometheus ... nuclear energy in space again gets a push.

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Without a separate vote or even a debate, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) has managed to deliver to a delighted NASA (news – web sites) enough money to forge ahead on a plan that would reshape U.S. space policy for decades to come.

President Bush (news – web sites)'s "Vision for Space Exploration," which would send humans to the moon and eventually to Mars, got a skeptical reception in January and was left for dead in midsummer, but it made a stunning last-minute comeback when DeLay delivered NASA's full \$16.2 billion budget request as part of the omnibus \$388 billion spending bill passed Nov. 20.

DeLay, whose newly redrawn district includes the Johnson Space Center, and NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe have all but claimed a mandate; but even with the money and parts of the project already up and running, the questions that once threatened to kill the initiative still remain largely unresolved.

What will it really cost? What NASA programs will be cut to fund it? How will other science agencies be affected? Instead of a debate and vote on the merits of the president's plan, the measure was adopted largely because DeLay threatened to scuttle the entire omnibus bill unless Bush got every nickel he requested.

"I wouldn't say we're critical of the moon-Mars program, but we are critical of the lack of clarity about the scientific benefits," said physicist Michael Lubell, spokesman for the American Physical Society, the nation's largest association of research physicists. "This is bound to be an extremely costly project, so what are we going to get from it?"

The responses are many: that humankind needs challenges; that robots will never be supple enough to take full scientific advantage of visits to other worlds; that if the United States doesn't do it, some other nation -- China, quite likely -- will. DeLay, a self-described "space nut," told Johnson Space Center employees a few days after the vote that "NASA helps America fulfill the dreams of the human heart."

And at a news conference the next day, O'Keefe said the omnibus bill embodied "as strong an endorsement as anyone could have hoped for the national space policy that the president articulated."

Columbia. Even today, the proposal finds few congressional detractors -- as an overall concept.

But the devil, now, as then, is in the details: "I support the president's initiative -- if it's paid for," said Rep. Bart Gordon (news, bio, voting record) (Tenn.), the Science Committee's leading Democrat. "I'm afraid we're setting ourselves up for a future train wreck."

Early in the year, O'Keefe tried to sell the proposal as a slow, steady initiative requiring a NASA budget increase in 2005 of only \$800 million. It was the beginning of "a journey," he said, quoting from the Bush speech, "not a race."

But the plan, if carried out, would be the most ambitious space enterprise ever undertaken, and lawmakers wondered whether other programs would be scaled back to make room for it: Would spectacular science missions such as the robotic Mars rovers suffer? Or Earth science, astronomy or aeronautics?

O'Keefe did not satisfy his questioners, but while Bush's plan languished in Congress, NASA was moving ahead aggressively to implement it. O'Keefe created a new Office of Exploration Systems, headed by Associate Administrator Craig E. Steidle, a retired Navy rear admiral, test pilot and military procurement specialist.

During the year, Steidle's office developed a timetable for the moon-Mars initiative, mapped its priorities and gathered experts to chop the project into contract-size pieces. By Thanksgiving, the agency had let more than 120 contracts.

The plan's early centerpiece is the next-generation "Crew Exploration Vehicle," designed to fly by 2014 and to reach the moon by 2020. NASA received about 1,000 responses to its initial request for "concepts" of what the vehicle should be.

"We selected 11 teams, and next August we're going to reduce them to two, or maybe three, who will actually build a vehicle, test and demonstrate it [without a crew] in 2008," Steidle said in an interview at NASA headquarters.

For the plan's other needs, NASA has vetted more than 3,700 proposals to provide technologies including navigation systems, tools and machinery. Caterpillar Inc. of Peoria, Ill., will provide equipment for doing construction on the moon, and Hamilton Sunstrand of Windsor Locks, Conn., will develop new techniques to reclaim water from human waste.

NASA next must pick a rocket system for launching the vehicle, and "we're looking at everything," Steidle said. In a few months, the agency will decide whether to use a

Some in Congress were not convinced. On June 20, the House Appropriations subcommittee charged with funding NASA trimmed Bush's 2005 budget request by \$1.1 billion and eliminated all \$438 million slated for the crew exploration vehicle.

"It was about the money," recalled subcommittee Chairman James T. Walsh (R-N.Y.). "I remember Sean [O'Keefe] coming in and trying to give people a comfort level, but the budget we had to work with didn't even come close."

Three days later, White House budget director Joshua B. Bolten sent a letter threatening a veto unless the bill gave the plan "adequate funding levels." DeLay had visited the White House hours earlier.

The bill never reached the House floor, but if Walsh wanted to get higher-ups to focus on it, he had succeeded. "We created the atmosphere where people could come to our rescue," Walsh said.

But it took awhile. In September the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (news – web sites) released a report suggesting that NASA intended to fund the president's plan in part by taking \$10 billion from signature science programs such as the one that produced the Mars rovers.

NASA's Isakowitz said most of the reallocations resulted from shifting control of existing programs to Steidle's office, not canceling them. For instance, he said, the Office of Explorations absorbed **Project Prometheus, a \$400 million-a-year program to develop nuclear power for space use.**

Still, Isakowitz acknowledged that NASA has delayed start-up or funding increases for some science projects in order to fund Bush's plan. These will bring the plan \$2.7 billion from 2005 to 2009.

The projects affected are mostly in two areas: "Beyond Einstein," astrophysics missions, and "Explorers," extremely competitive small missions usually focused on astronomy and the history of the universe.

Concerns about funding and priorities remained unresolved into the autumn, but Bush's reelection gave the administration a political boost. In a post-election interview, O'Keefe said he was "feeling better every day" about the plan's budget and "supremely confident" that it would be passed as written.

And so it proved. NASA was identified as a major sticking point when Senate and House conferees sat down to craft the final version of the omnibus spending bill near midnight Nov. 19, but Bolten, Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Ted Stevens (R-Alaska)