NASA

Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Opening Statement

Alan B. Mollohan, Chairman

Good afternoon; the hearing is called to order.

Welcome to this hearing of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, and Science for fiscal year 2011. Today, we will cover the budget, status and future direction of the US space program. Our witness is retired Major General Charles F. Bolden, Jr., NASA Administrator. Welcome General Bolden.

In 1957, the Soviet Union shocked the world by launching Sputnik and challenged the US with its superior launch capability. President Eisenhower responded by forming NASA and, by 1960, the US had launched the first weather satellite, the first data relay satellite, and the first navigation satellite. The first commercial communications satellite, Telstar, was launched in July 1962.

Confronting the Cold War challenge of the Soviet Union, President Kennedy said:

> "I believe this Nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish."

In 1969, NASA delivered on his vision, and US superiority in technology – especially missile technology – was on clear display for all to see. The cost in today's dollars was almost $100 billion.

This amazing era of accomplishment continues to dominate the vision of NASA, both within and without, but hard realities should be recognized. NASA employment peaked in 1967, and NASA pioneered reduction in force – RIF – procedures for the federal government. Over 10,000 people who had worked their hearts out getting us to the moon were out of a job. NASA's budget peaked in 1966 at over 24 billion in today's dollars. Using Apollo program capabilities, Skylab and Apollo-Soyus flew, but from the summer of 1975 until the spring of 1981, the United States did not, could not, fly an astronaut.

In answer to the question of what to do next, President Nixon supported the start of the Space Shuttle program. By the time it flew, the first US space station had fallen to earth due to lack of funding and the resulting lack of capability to boost Skylab's orbit. The money was not made available to build a new orbiting lab as proposed. So, the Shuttle had no orbiting lab to shuttle to except for the Russian Mir, which it visited multiple times.

In January 1984, President Reagan challenged NASA to achieve a permanent manned presence in space and the International Space Station program began. The initial cost estimate was $8 billion, and no one expected it to be 25 years and over $40 billion before construction was complete. In 1984, the Shuttles were new; no investment was begun to replace them until 2004, too late to prevent a gap in US astronaut launch capability.

Today is not the early 1960's. Then, a trip to the moon was a science fiction dream; today Star Wars and Star Trek are based on a dream of interstellar travel and galaxy-spanning federations or empires. In Kennedy's time rocketry was a major hallmark of national technological achievement; today, US achievement is evident in creation of the Internet, invention of the iPhone, production of the fastest supercomputers, and sequencing the human genome. The Soviet Union is no more. Our shooting wars are with those who oppose modernity, not those who challenge us in a rush to the future. Competition with China is more a matter of innovation, intellectual property, manufacturing and resources.

In this contemporary context, faced with the need to set the future direction of the human spaceflight program, the President has formulated a program that shifts from plowing ahead with development programs driven by a return to the moon to a focus on government development of new enabling technologies, with the eventual goal of landing astronauts on Mars. Exploration beyond low Earth orbit will be vigorous, but for a time it will be achieved through the use of robots. Commercial provision of astronaut transport to the Space Station is proposed, and the life of the Space Station is extended until at least 2020. At the same time, NASA's programs in Earth and space science and aeronautics are strengthened, education programs are continued and the Kennedy launch complex is slated for modernization.

So today, we find ourselves at another pivot point for the space program. Like Presidents Nixon and Reagan, President Obama is committing the nation to human spaceflight as a continuing endeavor, but this commitment is part of a balanced effort within a constrained budget. Frankly, many of us yearn for the Apollo-like vision of the 1960's, but is that the approach that best serves our national interest? Mr. Administrator, there is much we need to learn about this major change in the direction of our space program.

Following the opening statement of Ranking Member Wolf, we will ask you to provide a summary of your written testimony, which will be included in the hearing record, and then we will go to questions from Subcommittee members.