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Apollo 10 and 17 Astronaut

With the submission of his 2011 budget, Mr. Obama is showing extreme naivety or else deliberately taking accountability for his calculated steps in dismantling America's leadership in the world – “spread the wealth” internationally and turn our country into a second-class nation – economically, militarily, technologically, and politically. This ideology flows against the grain of over 200 years of our history and the will of all Americans. The space program never has been nor will ever be an entitlement program – it's an investment in the future – an investment in technology, jobs, world respect and leadership, and perhaps most importantly the inspiration and education of our youth. The results of our commitment to space over the last four plus decades are now evident in our factories, homes, hospitals, in the world of communications, as well as the stimulus it has provided in inspiring our kids to dream “the impossible” and then go out and make it happen. Hardly a day goes by without a young 30, 40, or even 50 year old (teenager or younger during the day of Apollo) thanking me for the inspiration I gave him or her to become a scientist, engineer, teacher, technician or perhaps a member of our country's armed forces. It wasn't me, it was the dreams inspired by the challenge of going where no human had gone before and the opportunities that subsequently came within reach. Aviation and space have been a romance for over a hundred years – the true legacy of the Wright Brothers is not that we can fly higher, faster, and farther than ever before, but the inspiration and dreams instilled in all who followed in their footsteps to do what has never been done before, what others couldn't do, what others wouldn't do, or perhaps what others were afraid to do. This is America in which I grew up and the America I desperately want to save for my grandchildren.

Mr. Obama's budget has not one penny focused on human spaceflight, rather he sets aside nominal amounts (certainly by comparison with his extravagance elsewhere) for the private sector to develop a capability that “some day” may lead to a manned orbiting vehicle. I strongly support this concept made possible by the technology developed by NASA over the years, but this is space exploitation not space exploration, and we all know it will be a decade or more before the private sector provides a ready, safe and economical access to our near space environment. “Curiosity is the essence of human existence”, and exploration is the way of satisfying our insatiable quest for knowledge. Mr. Obama also sets aside dollars for the development of technology – technology to do what? History demonstrates that the evolution of technology is subject to a need – a challenge, a crises or a combination thereof, such as Apollo, WWII, or energy independence. First comes the mission, then comes the development of technology to accomplish the established goals. The high risk technology did not exist when John F. Kennedy challenged us to “go to the moon and do the other things...” He was asking us to do what most believed impossible – what others thought could not be done. After Sputnik the world looked to America for an answer – they expected us to respond and we did, as in the past during WWII, but the “we” was not the few who had an opportunity to walk in space or call the moon their home. Those of us who had this unique opportunity were simply the tip of the arrow. It was the thousands of Americans, who by nature responded to the challenge, who were the strength behind the bow, that made each one of those steps into space possible.

And that brings me to the point of jobs.

The best and brightest minds at NASA and throughout the multitudes of private contractors, large and small, did not join the team to design windmills. If Mr. Obama's budget becomes the rule of the land, these technicians, engineers, and scientists, a generation removed from Apollo, yet re-inspired by the prospect of going back to the moon and on to Mars, will be gone – where I don't know – but gone. You want to invest in jobs – try taking some of those stimulus dollars and investing in space. These are the kinds of jobs that will eventually create more jobs – from the high tech engineer to the delivery truck driver.

Not only is human spaceflight and space exploration at risk, but the future of this country and thus the future of our children and grandchildren as well.

Now is the time for wiser heads in Congress to prevail. Now is the time to overrule Mr. Obama's pledge to mediocrity. Now is the time to be bold, innovative and wise in deciding how we invest in the future of America.

Gene Cernan
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