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I am a retired astronaut; and, in one of my previous lives I was Congressional Director for NASA (for DR James Fletcher, Bill Nelson was in the House, under Presidents Reagan and Bush).

Obviously, I have nothing against the heritage, and the decades-long list of the rank and file membership of this great NASA family of ours. They all have carried, do and will "carry the mail" for the President (I did the same thing years ago. You do it, or you move on!!) My problem is, has been, is and will be; Washington, DC is missing (and has missed) the whole point of the matter for years.

We (Americans) deserve better. We deserve, have earned and should have "it all"; i.e., continuous manned access to low earth orbit, a part in the International Space Station (for as long as practical / feasible; not an arbitrary 2020 shut-down, without an input from our international partners); and, long-range manned and robotic exploration of Moon, Mars and beyond. If it takes \$30B / year to do that, that's what we Americans deserve. It's a good bet that Congress and the current and previous administrations lose track of that much, annually, on "no-return" appropriations.

As has been bantered and debated for years, we (Americans and our Congress) need to decide that it is jurisprudant to reinvest a certain percentage of our Federal budget on Research and Development (R&D); no matter which party is in control of the White House or the Congress (it's just good common sense, substantiated by years of resulting preeminence, not only in space exploration; but also, in the trickle-down and positive influence on education, national security, military prowess, the overall economy and , believe it or not, "National Pride" in being an American). NASA (and what's left of pure R&D in America) should be treated as an "entitlement" and dealt with accordingly. You can't plan 10, 20 or 30 year scientific / explorative programs when every two years you face the potential of having another political change of control in either the Executive and / or the Legislative branches of our government.

You cannot "spend" your way out of economic chaos and "social problematics" without finding better ways to design, build, manufacture, produce, construct, influence, educate and inspire; all the things that NASA has done, is doing and will do in the future (assuming our politicians decide to do something innovative, robust, sensible, meaningful and long

overdue). We (Americans) are at a pivotal point in our history: deciding whether to accept this latest (and continual) erosion of governmental support for what's logical and / or rational; or, to force our leaders (on both sides of the political fence) to stand up for one of "the things" that made us a great nation. This is not about NASA vs. the private sector, Democrats vs. Republicans, "space States" vs. "non-space States", Senate vs. the House, Bush policy vs. Obama policy; this is, simply, about America continuing to lead the way in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (how about a nice acronym; STEM?).

One final, big, over-riding question: why do we (Americans, Congress, the Administration and NASA) want to invest all the money in "STEM" programs, when there will be no place for our scientists, technicians, engineers and mathematicians to ply their skills?? I'll bet we have college seniors today who were inspired by the 2004 "Lunar/ Mars Initiative", entered college with aspirations of joining the NASA team to pursue that dream; and, now realize that their dreams are in the process of being dashed. Concurrently, we should consider some of today's high school seniors. They are poised in preparation for college, were considering a career in science, now (in light of the current situation) finding themselves questioning that course of action.

We are hearing (almost every day) that it's time "to stand up and shout" about something! Well, add this plea to your list; and, try to make it a priority!! Because, if we (collectively) can't happen in the space exploration arena; the "shouting" will not only intensify, but we will find in breaking out in more and more of the corners in this American society of ours.

Jon McBride (one of the lucky few to have escaped gravity for a prolonged period of time)

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PS / Since we (Americans) are getting out of engineering and design, research and development, manufacturing (light and heavy) and a robust space exploration program, we may want to consider developing a "STEML" program for all of our students. In order for our "STEM" students to be successful, they will need to be conversant / fluent in at least one foreign language ("L"), so that they can interact with their owners, supervisors and co-workers in whatever country they go to for their selected vocation (I would suggest Chinese).