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Human spaceflight and presidential agendas: Niche policies and NASA, opportunity and failure[☆]

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ABSTRACT

After JFK's assassination in 1963, the Apollo program was virtually guaranteed a run at achieving success although its value was not as high as later mythology suggests. Lyndon Johnson cut the program's budget and vetoed a continuation in the Post Apollo Applications Program, a position ratified by his successor, Richard Nixon. A subsequent attempt by NASA to extend the Apollo program concept to future space exploration was rejected by Nixon. This 1969 decision foreshadowed presidential decisions regarding the human spaceflight program over the past nearly five decades. What makes the relative status of the human spaceflight within presidential agenda interesting and informative is that its importance fluctuates dramatically across time usually due to events outside the realm of space policy. Major changes in either international and/or domestic politics occur and as a result American space policy changes. What appears on the surface as an agency and program insulated from such considerations is in fact one totally subservient to such events. Space policy is only successful in seeking presidential support when it is directly and publicly linked to current presidential priorities; however, those linkages often prove fragile and short lived in part because of NASA's parochial focus and politics. By one count, there have been at least nineteen instances when NASA and its activities came to the president's agenda in a manner requiring a presidential decision. This analysis draws upon the public policy literature dealing with science and technology and the unanticipated outcomes arising within that field. What has not occurred to this point is an explicit analysis of presidential engagement in a framework not driven by presidential personality and short term events but rather one that focuses on space policy as an example of normal politics, meaning presidential engagement in space policy happens only under certain conditions.

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1. Introduction

After President John F. Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, the Apollo lunar landing program was virtually guaranteed a run at achieving success although its

political value was never as high as later mythology suggests [1]. His successor, President Lyndon Johnson, cut the program's budget and effectively vetoed its continuation in the form of the Post Apollo Applications Program, a position subsequently ratified by his successor, President Richard Nixon. Rising Vietnam War costs, the Great Society's budget growth, and a troubled U.S. economy forced Johnson's hand regarding the space program. Nixon later cancelled the last three Apollo missions, ironically the most space science oriented missions of all. This further emphasized the Apollo program's political rather than

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scientific nature from its inception. The nationalistic thrust of Apollo's origins so critical earlier undermined its capacity to justify continuing further missions in terms of scientific knowledge. The Moon despite early hype was not the optimal location for achieving military advantage. The "high ground" of greatest military value was low earth orbit. The Apollo program's political driver had been accomplished in July 1969 with the *Eagle's* landing on the lunar surface. The space program became yesterday's news as measured by the drop off in television audience for subsequent missions, *Apollo 13* being proof with that mission largely ignored unless disaster threatened. For the space community, Apollo proved a two edged sword – allowing unprecedented acceleration of the manned space program but for a political purpose, once achieved the program's justification vanished. Space science activities flourished after Apollo ended but for NASA, their political value was minimal.

An attempt by NASA through the Space Task Group Report to extend the Apollo program concept to future human space exploration was rejected by President Nixon. The agency was dispatched on its journey through the backwaters of American politics [2]. This 1969 Nixon decision foreshadowed future presidential decisions regarding the space program including the human spaceflight effort over the past five decades. Presidents remained rhetorically supportive but budget support was more grudging with decisions to roll costs off onto their successors common: Nixon 1972, George H.W. Bush in 1989 and 1992, George W. Bush in 2004, and Barack Obama in 2010.

The status of the human spaceflight within presidential agendas revolves around the reality that the program's perceived public and political importance fluctuates dramatically across time and remains subject to outside political events. When major changes in international and domestic politics occur; space policy often changes in direction and content. What appears on the surface as an agency and program insulated from such politicized considerations is in fact one totally subservient to such events and deeply immersed in politics. What became even more stressful for the agency are instances when space agency crises create the necessity for presidential action. Such NASA crises included both operational disasters and budget difficulties, which are recurring. Over time, the agency's image as a successful "can do" organization eroded at least in the view of Congress and the executive branch especially in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). This grew especially true during the 1970s during the run up to the space shuttle's first flight [3].

As a general rule, space policy is only actually successful in seeking active presidential support when NASA becomes directly and publicly linked to presidential priorities. Those linkages once established often prove fragile and short term in part because of the space field's parochial focus and internal politics. Internal politics within the space agency fall along several lines of cleavage. First but less important is the split between space and aeronautics – the latter has faded to comparative political insignificance despite the reality that aeronautics remains the major success in sustaining U.S. economic competitiveness globally. The aeronautics community has been submerged within the larger

space fixation of the agency's leadership. Within the space component, cleavages range across scientific disciplines and sub-disciplines and between NASA's major centers. One cluster of centers heavily focuses on human spaceflight while others concentrate on space science or aviation.

The most important intra-agency split is between human space exploration and space science writ large. The pursuit of crewed exploration pits that sector against all other segments of the agency's space portfolio for budgetary attention. Within the space science community conflicts exist between those pursuing astronomy across different spectra, planetary scientists, and environmental scientists. All these conflicts line up with NASA's various centers and labs and multiple cross cutting missions. The Jet Propulsion Lab (JPL) for example competes with Goddard Space Flight Center for science mission funding although their focus within space science differs but with finite budgets competitors are clear within the agency. The Hubble Space Telescope is operated by the Association of Universities for Research in Astronomy (AURA) through the Space Telescope Science Institute. However, for these academic institutions operating at the cutting edge of science, cross cutting pressures exist because NSF and NIH may be more important partners. While factions within NASA struggle for budget share and programs, presidents with their broader agendas move on, leaving NASA behind. You see this scenario playing out since 2009 as budgets tightened especially for discretionary spending including NASA. The agency's relative successes in sustaining its budgets often defies political gravity in remaining larger than its political clout would justify (see below for amplification of this point).

By our count, there have been at least nineteen instances when U.S. space policy conducted through NASA and its activities came to the president's agenda in a manner requiring presidential engagement [4]. This analysis draws upon the public policy literature dealing with science and technology and the unanticipated outcomes that often arise within that field. This paper presents an explicit analysis of presidential engagement across multiple administrations in a framework not driven by presidential personality and specific historical events (the Apollo endeavor) but rather one that focuses on space policy as an example of normal agency politics. This means presidential engagement occurs only under certain conditions and quickly departs the field once a satisficing solution has been devised. Space program partisans often invoke the president as the necessary engine for progress but that remains largely an Apollo legacy and a misreading of presidential intentions which are much more mundane and short term including President Kennedy in announcing the Apollo program [5].

This analysis examines the budgetary aspects of NASA's trip through American politics and then we will examine instances of major presidential interventions into NASA's repertoire of programs and their responses to disasters within the program. Finally, the focus is upon those instances where significant change occurred with regards to NASA and its future endeavors. What that illustrates are the failure of significant change to actually take place within NASA programs and especially in its sense of its destiny.

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