

CONGRESSMAN SHERWOOD BOEHLERT (R-NY)
OPENING STATEMENT FOR NASA HEARING
February 17, 2005

I want to welcome everyone here this morning to this important hearing on the NASA budget. I see this hearing as the first in a series that will culminate in the introduction of a NASA authorization bill. Our goal is to get such a bill to the House floor in time to influence the appropriations process. I know that is Chairman Calvert's goal as well. Last year, we were deeply engaged in that process behind the scenes; now we should be ready for a public role.

I want to do an authorization bill because I think it's critical that Congress have a full and open debate on the President's Vision for Space Exploration and the future of NASA before NASA barrels ahead with the program. Congress has never endorsed – in fact, has never discussed – the Vision. What we did do, as part of a huge Omnibus bill, is provide the money to enable NASA to continue planning how it wants to go forward. But the truly critical spending commitments start in FY 06, so this year is when we must have the debate.

Here are some of my current thoughts about how I'd like that debate to come out. First, let me state clearly some things that I am for.

I am for returning humans to the moon by 2020. I am for moving ahead prudently but swiftly with the development of a Crew Exploration Vehicle (CEV) for that purpose. I am for retiring the Space Shuttle as soon as possible, but under absolutely no circumstances later than December 31, 2010. I am for a NASA that sees itself as a science agency, with all of Space Science, Earth Science and Aeronautics receiving the

attention and funding accorded to priority areas. I am for a NASA that is open to outside ideas from academia and the private sector.

So where does that leave me on the current budget proposal? With the same mixed feelings I've had in the past. First, let me blunt, I don't think NASA should be our top budget priority either in this Committee or the Congress. That means in a budget as excruciatingly tight as this one, NASA probably should not get as much as the President has proposed. Moreover, even if NASA received every cent it has requested, it would still be trying to do too much at once – the historic pattern for the Agency, as the Gehman Report noted. So something has to give, and this hearing will be a first step in looking at what that might be.

There's one other problem we have reviewing this budget. There are a lot of fundamental questions that NASA still isn't ready to answer. That's not a criticism of the Agency. That's just a description of where they are in the planning process, and we have to keep it in mind.

What are some examples? They can't tell us what research will be done aboard the Station. They can't tell us how many more Shuttle flights will be scheduled. They can't tell us how they're going to get around the Iran Non-Proliferation Act. They can't tell us how many people the CEV will carry or whether it will go to the Space Station. They can't tell us what we might do when we get to the moon. They obviously can't tell us whether the Shuttle will once again fly successfully.

Again, this is not because NASA hasn't been forthcoming. Quite the contrary. Top NASA officials have spent countless hours with our staff, giving direct and candid answers to a wide range of questions. But they can't provide answers that they don't yet have. And we need to understand just how much is unknown – the extent, for example, that cost estimates for the CEV and Project Prometheus are still (quote) “placeholders.”

So, one thing I'll be asking today is when some of our questions might be answered.

I know some answers should be forthcoming soon. We understand, for example, that the Administration could send up in the next month or so proposed language to amend the Iran Nonproliferation Act. That's a critical matter because the current law would bring the Station program to a halt by next April. Any proposal will be reviewed carefully. The only thing I can say now – and I think the Administration agrees with this – is that the Station is a lot less important than non-proliferation is. I'm not interested in having to go into space because we've blown ourselves up.

Well, with so many questions pending, let me stop there. We have before us Fred Gregory, the deputy administrator of NASA, who has been an integral part of all the decision-making that went into the FY 06 proposal. The Agency will be in good hands as he becomes acting Administrator this weekend. But I am sure that he is as eager as anyone in this town to see an end to the parlor game of predicting who will be appointed when to succeed Sean O'Keefe. But I'm as helpless as he is in bringing that about.

Sean left the Agency far stronger than he found it. Now we need to decide what the next steps in creating a strong and productive NASA should be.

Mr. Gordon.

