

# Private rocket launch successful on maiden flight (Update 3)

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The SpaceX Falcon 9 test rocket lifts off of pad 40 at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Cape Canaveral, Florida. The privately-owned US firm SpaceX launched a rocket on its first test flight Friday, in what observers say is a milestone for the space industry and in the race to develop commercial carriers.

A privately owned rocket successfully blasted off on its first flight, marking a significant milestone for the space industry in the race to develop commercial carriers.

SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket blasted off in mid-afternoon Friday from Cape

Canaveral in Florida, reaching Earth orbit as planned nine minutes into the flight.

"All in all, this has been a good day for SpaceX and a promising development for the US space program," said Robyn Ringuette of SpaceX, who provided commentary on the launch from the firm's headquarters in Hawthorne, California.

The two-stage rocket delivered the Dragon capsule, a mockup of the company's spacecraft aimed to eventually facilitate human space travel, into orbit after a 9.5-minute trip.

The first and second stage of the white, 180-foot (55-meter) tall rocket separated successfully just three minutes and six seconds into the flight.

"Congratulations to Space X on today's launch of its Falcon 9 launch vehicle," NASA Administrator Charles Bolden said in a statement.

"Space X's accomplishment is an important milestone in the commercial transportation effort and puts the company a step closer to providing cargo services to the International Space Station."

Technical glitches initially delayed the launch, including an automatic computer override of the system that led SpaceX to abort its first attempt.

The launch represented a key test in developing commercial launchers capable of ferrying cargo and astronauts to the orbiting International Space Station (ISS).

It came as President Barack Obama seeks to convince a reluctant Congress of the merits of his decision in February to cancel the Constellation program -- designed to return US to the moon by 2020 --

which effectively killed the Ares 1 rocket.

He has turned to the private sector to help fill the gap after the space shuttle fleet is grounded later this year, and before a new generation of spacecraft is developed.

Obama has proposed spending six billion dollars over five years to help the private sector develop reliable and affordable launchers to transport cargo and US astronauts to the International Space Station.

During the transition period, the United States will depend on Russian Soyuz rockets for access to the ISS -- unless the private sector can propose viable launchers.

The president visited SpaceX installations at Cape Canaveral during an April visit to the Kennedy Space Center.

SpaceX leaders emphasized that the Falcon 9 launch was just the first in a series of test flights.

"As a former Apollo astronaut, I think it's safe to say that SpaceX and the other commercial developers embody the 21st century version of the Apollo frontier spirit," said Rusty Schweickart, who served as an astronaut aboard the Apollo 9 lunar mission.

Former space shuttle astronaut Byron Lichtenberg said he expected that many more astronauts would travel in space thanks to the Falcon 9's success.

"Lower cost launches means more flights, which means more astronauts," he added.

"We've only had 500 astronauts in the history of the Space Age, but I

hope to see thousands more in the decades to come."

NASA has already signed contracts with SpaceX -- or Space Exploration Technologies Corporation -- a start-up founded eight years ago by multimillionaire Elon Musk, who made his fortune by helping found and eventually sell online pay system PayPal.

The NASA contracts, signed in late 2008 and worth 3.1 billion dollars, are to deliver cargo to the ISS between 2011 and 2016.

The US space agency has also signed contracts with another company, Orbital Sciences Corp. Its Taurus II rocket is set for its first flight in 2011.

SpaceX and other upstarts would be up against industry giants Boeing and Lockheed Martin, which together operate United Launch Alliance (ULA), whose stable includes Atlas V and Delta 4 rockets that have logged considerable flight hours.

## **SpaceX founder Elon Musk, a dot.com 'renaissance man'**

SpaceX founder Elon Musk is a hard-charging former Internet entrepreneur who has channeled a dot.com fortune into a series of ambitious ventures -- from space flight to electric cars to solar energy.

Besides SpaceX, whose Falcon 9 rocket blasted off on its maiden voyage on Friday, Musk, 38, is the co-founder of electric carmaker Tesla Motors and SolarCity, a company which makes solar panels for homes and businesses.

Born in South Africa to a South African father and a Canadian mother,

Musk moved to Canada in his late teens and then to the United States, earning bachelor's degrees in physics and business from the University of Pennsylvania.

After graduating from the prestigious Ivy League institution, Musk abandoned plans to pursue further studies at Stanford University and started Zip2, a company which made online publishing software for the media industry.

He banked his first millions before the age of 30 when he sold Zip2 to US computer maker Compaq for more than 300 million dollars in 1999.

Musk's next company, X.com, eventually became PayPal, the online payments firm bought by Internet auction giant eBay for 1.5 billion dollars in 2002.

Over six feet (1.8 meters) tall with a high forehead and a piercing gaze, Musk acknowledges that his personal intensity has been a key to his success.

"I believe in really pushing super hard and not giving up," Musk said in an interview with Time magazine for its latest issue on the 100 most influential people in the world.

"As long as I can see a path to success I'll keep going so long as I have the resources to do so," he said.

In 2002, Musk launched SpaceX, or Space Exploration Technologies Corp., where he serves as chief executive and chief technology officer, with plans to develop low-cost rockets.

The US space agency NASA has contracted SpaceX to help deliver cargo and astronauts to the International Space Station while a new

generation of space vehicles is being developed to replace the space shuttle.

Musk hopes to eventually send a manned mission to Mars but space flight is just one of his many passions.

Jon Favreau, director of "Iron Man," calls Musk a modern-day "Renaissance man."

In an article for Time, Favreau said that he and actor Robert Downey Jr. modeled the main character in the movie -- "genius billionaire Tony Stark" -- after the Silicon Valley star.

Musk told Time that his goal was to be "involved in things that are going to make a significant difference to the future of humanity.

"That was the motivation for getting involved in the Internet and then sustainable energy with Tesla and SolarCity," he said.

Musk founded Palo Alto, California-based Tesla in 2003 to manufacture "affordable electric vehicles for mainstream consumers."

Tesla's first vehicle, the Tesla Roadster, is a high-performance sports car which costs over 100,000 dollars and can go nearly 250 miles (400 kilometers) on a single charge.

Its owners include California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and Hollywood star George Clooney. Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page are investors in the company.

In January, Tesla announced plans for an initial public offering of stock and Toyota said last month it was acquiring a 50-million-dollar stake in Tesla and teaming up to jointly develop electric vehicles.

Tesla is also making a "Model S" five-passenger sedan. Expected in 2012, the Model S is to sell for around 50,000 dollars.

Tesla has yet to turn a profit, however, and the company has reportedly eaten up much of Musk's once vast fortune. Musk has also poured 100 million dollars of his own money into SpaceX over the years.

Musk's financial situation has come to light in his divorce case from his Canadian-born wife, science fiction writer Justine Musk.

According to technology blog VentureBeat, Musk wrote in a February filing in their divorce case that he "ran out of cash" late last year and has been living off personal loans from friends since October 2009.

Justine Musk, mother of their five sons, which include triplets, has been chronicling the divorce proceedings on her blog, "Love, soul & vision."

One post she sarcastically titled "Golddigger" outlined her demands from her "billionaire and utterly brilliant" husband, including a request for 10 percent of his stock in Tesla and five percent of his SpaceX shares.

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