

# Will the U.S. continue to 'reach for the stars'?

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U.S. space shuttle Endeavour sits on a launch pad at the Kennedy Space Center, Florida. The shuttle's final launch is scheduled for this Friday to the International Space Station. Credit: BRUCE WEAVER/AFP/Getty Images

With the space shuttle program winding down — Discovery returned from its final mission in March, Endeavor is scheduled for its last flight this Friday, and Atlantis should launch at the end of June — observers are wondering about the future of the U.S. space program. Will there be room for any kind of ambitious space program, given the state of the U.S. economy? Will space flight move increasingly toward privatization? As former Florida congressman James Bacchus, one of the principal congressional sponsors of the International Space Station, wrote in *The Hill's Congress Blog* in March, there has been “utter bipartisan failure thus far to figure out what to do next in human space flight, how to make it work, and how to pay for it at a price our chosen leaders think we can

afford.” Here, Associate Professor of Political Science William Kay, an expert on the history and politics of the space program, offers some predictions.

## **What do you think will happen to the future of space exploration? Will it increase or decrease or plateau, or change in some other way?**

In the short run, there will be little change overall. Human [space flight](#) missions will continue to the International [Space](#) Station, using Russian Soyuz spacecraft for transportation. In the long run — moving beyond ISS or missions to the Moon or Mars — the direction and pace of [space exploration](#) depends almost entirely on developments in the relevant technologies, particularly those related to launches.

## **Do you think privatization of space exploration is a good idea?**

Most of the movement toward privatization — which has actually been under way since the Reagan Administration — I have found to be, on the whole, a positive development. Unfortunately, there have also been cases — the most notable being NASA’s decision to contract out shuttle maintenance — where the results have been anything but positive. In any event, privatization is clearly the trend of the future.

One of the great success stories in the development of the “space market” has been the commercial launch sector. In 1981, when the first privately developed rocket was launched, everything sent into space up to that point was the work of a government. By 2000, the commercial launch industry, made up of dozens of firms from almost as many countries, had become a billion-dollar business. Now, everything sent into space, with the partial exception of the shuttle, is launched by a

private company. More firms, including a number interested in offering “space tourism,” are expected to join the effort in years to come.

## **Just how important is it that we “reach for the stars” — especially when the economy is in such dire straits?**

Speaking of the economy, one small advantage a traditional, government-run [space program](#) has over the privatized approach is that the former is relatively more recession-proof.

With respect to “reaching for the stars,” it is very important that we, as a country, have a clear and consistent set of priorities. In general, I think a great nation should devote some of its resources toward the “lofty and ambitious” — which need not be as gargantuan as the Apollo program. On the other hand, I think “greatness” also means acknowledging and recognizing those occasions — hopefully few in number and short in duration — where the immediate needs of citizens requires the postponing of these loftier pursuits.

Provided by Northeastern University

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