

Experts say Gingrich moon base dreams not lunacy

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Republican presidential candidate former House Speaker Newt Gingrich speaks with members of the media outside a polling place at the First Baptist Church of Windermere in Orlando, Fla., Tuesday, Jan. 31, 2012. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

(AP) -- Republican presidential candidate Newt Gingrich wants to create a lunar colony that he says could become a U.S. state. There's his grand research plan to figure out what makes the human brain tick. And he's warned about electromagnetic pulse attacks leaving America without electricity.

To some people, these ideas sound like science fiction. But mostly they are not.

Several science policy experts say the former House speaker's ideas are based in [mainstream science](#). But somehow, Gingrich manages to make

them sound way out there, taking them first a small step and then a giant leap further than where other politicians have gone.

Gingrich's promise that "by the end of my second term we will have the first permanent base on the moon" got amped up in a recent debate in Florida, which lost thousands of jobs with the end of the [space shuttle program](#). By then, the lunar base had become a colony and even a potential state, and his moon ideas were ridiculed by rival Mitt Romney.

Returning to the moon and building an outpost there is not new. Until three years ago, it was U.S. policy and billions of dollars were spent on that idea.

Staying on the moon dates at least to 1969, when a government committee recommended that NASA first build a winged, reusable [space shuttle](#) followed by a space station and then a moon outpost. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush proposed going to the moon and staying there.

Sixteen years later, in 2005, his son, President George W. Bush, proposed a similar lunar outpost, phased out the space shuttle program and spent more than \$9 billion designing a return to the [moon program](#).

George Washington University space policy director Scott Pace, who was NASA's associate administrator in the second Bush administration and is a Romney supporter, said the 2020 [lunar base](#) date Gingrich mentioned was feasible when it was proposed in 2005.

But it is no longer, felled by funding cuts and President Barack Obama's decision to cancel the program. Pace said it would be hard to figure out when NASA could get back to the moon, but that such a return is doable.

What kept killing return-to-the moon plans were the costs, starting in

1969. The proposal died 20 years later when the price tag was released: more than \$700 billion in current dollars. The second President Bush's plans started running into problems due to insufficient funding. After a special commission said those plans were not sustainable, Obama cancelled the return-to-the-moon program. Instead, he ordered NASA to aim astronauts toward an asteroid and eventually Mars, something many space experts say is even more ambitious.

"Some of you may like it and you may dislike it, but I gave the boldest explanation of going into space since John F. Kennedy in 1961," Gingrich said this week in Florida. "I believe in an America of big ideas and big solutions. I believe if we unleash the American people we will rebuild the American dream."

In Florida, nearly all the Republican presidential candidates promoted private companies sending astronauts into space. Several companies are building private spaceships. Commercial space companies taking over the job of getting Americans into low Earth orbit is a cornerstone of the Obama space plan. But, again, money has been an issue.

For example, NASA received \$406 million in its current budget for private space programs. Obama had asked Congress for \$805 million.

Neal Lane, former head of the National Science Foundation and White House science adviser during the Clinton administration, said Gingrich's proposals aren't crazy, although he may disagree with some of them. Gingrich's ideas and actions are "very pro-science," said Lane, who credited Gingrich with protecting federal science research from budget cuts in the 1990s.

"He's on the edge of mainstream thinking about big science. Except for the idea of establishing a colony on the moon, it's not over the edge," added Syracuse University science policy professor Henry Lambright.

In Iowa, Gingrich pushed a "brain science" initiative that advocates spending more private and federal money to map the human brain to help fight and cure Alzheimer's disease. He said the idea was based on the experience of watching his late mother's transformation from a happy person with friends to living in a long-term care facility suffering from bipolar disease, depression and physical ailments.

Gingrich said his "whole emphasis on brain science" is based on his mother's depression and mental illnesses. Discussing the issue in Iowa, he wiped away a tear, saying: "It's not a theory. It's in fact, my mother."

The idea of mapping the brain to figure out how it works is a traditional scientific approach to a difficult problem. Scientists have tried to conquer disease by mapping the human genome and figuring out the basic biology of cancer, said Arizona State University science policy professor Dan Sarewitz. The trouble is that, in the past, it hasn't paid off as promised, he said.

Gingrich also has raised eyebrows with his dire warnings about the threat of electromagnetic pulses. The fear being that a nuclear bomb detonated hundreds of miles above America could knock out the country's electricity for a long time. In 2009, Gingrich said it "may be the greatest threat we face ... We would in fact lose our civilization in a matter of seconds."

Paul Fischbeck, a professor of engineering and risk at Carnegie Mellon University, said the threat has existed for about a half a century and is real. But "it's getting more likely and more dangerous" as America becomes more electronic-dependent and other countries advance in technology, he said.

Still, it's space where Gingrich dreams biggest and raises the most eyebrows.

Much of the criticism of his space plans, especially in the media, have been unfair, said Alan Stern, NASA's space sciences chief during George W. Bush's administration. He said Gingrich is just thinking big, like a pioneer.

"That's how 'Star Trek' begins," said Stern, vice president of the Southwest Research Institute and director of the Florida Space Institute. "But when a government guy or politician talks that way, they just get clobbered about being unrealistic and that's unfortunate."

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