

Gingrich vows to establish a colony on the moon (Update)

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Republican presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich (L) speaks with his wife Callista (R) at a Lake County Tea Party rally in Mount Dora, Florida. Gingrich has stirred strong passions by claiming he will establish a permanent moon base by 2020 if elected, but experts say he is living on another planet.

Republican presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich has stirred strong passions by claiming he will establish a permanent moon base by 2020 if elected, but experts say he is living on another planet.

The basic idea is not actually as far-fetched as it sounds. NASA in 2006 announced plans to set up a colony on the south pole of the moon, in around 2020, as a base for further manned exploration of the solar system.

The problem for Gingrich, a space enthusiast with ideas dating back

decades for zero-gravity honeymoons and lunar greenhouses, is that the 2008 financial crisis came along and turned feasible projects into pipe dreams.

"A lunar base by 2020 is a total fantasy," John Logsdon, professor emeritus at George Washington University's Space Policy Institute, told AFP.

"We got to the moon in the 1960s by spending over four percent of the federal budget on Apollo. NASA's now at one-tenth of that level."

During boom-time, President George W. Bush called for a return to the moon, followed by Mars expeditions, and NASA drew up plans called Constellation to meet these goals and replace the shuttle fleet when it retired.

But President Barack Obama scrapped Constellation in 2010, saying the plans were "over budget, behind schedule, and lacking in innovation," and the once-proud shuttle fleet now lies mothballed.

American astronauts now have to rely on Russian spacecraft to get to the International Space Station, and on Florida's "Space Coast," home to NASA's Kennedy Space Center and Cape Canaveral, there is a mood of despondency.

Against this depressed backdrop, Gingrich has left himself open to the charge that his grandiose vision for human spaceflight is simply an attempt to pander to vulnerable voters.

"By the end of my second term, we will have the first permanent base on the moon, and it will be American," he told supporters Wednesday at a Florida rally.

Never one to shy away from bold statements, Gingrich compared himself to Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and the Wright Brothers, boasting: "I accept the charge that I am an American and Americans are instinctively grandiose."

At a time of austerity when most Americans are struggling to make ends meet, space enthusiasts poured scorn on his quest, especially as Gingrich himself is bent on slashing government-funded enterprises.

"The naysayers out there are not the engineers, they are people who deeply understand the political system and recognize that certain conditions might not be possible given a particular climate," Neil deGrasse Tyson, a leading American astrophysicist, told MSNBC television.

Gingrich suggested setting aside 10 percent of NASA's budget for prize incentives aimed at boosting the commercial space sector but did not spell out how he intended to finance his colossal endeavor.

The former House speaker's belief that it can be done while reducing NASA's budget is "detached from reality," Logsdon told AFP.

"There are so many other claims on the federal budget. Back in the 1960s we weren't running massive deficits that provided a constraint on funding," he explained, describing Gingrich's language as "almost irresponsible."

NASA's original plans envisaged a solar-powered base on the moon's south pole that could serve as a forward base for manned missions to Mars, sending man back to the lunar surface for the first time since 1972.

After the permanent facilities were established, the program aimed to set

up 180-day visits to the moon, during which trips to the Red Planet could be planned.

NASA has since scaled back drastically and its goal now is to develop commercial initiatives in the hope that a substitute spacecraft will be ready to fly people to the space station by 2015.

Gingrich's opponents have accused him of pandering, but it is a mixed message for Florida's "Space Coast" dwellers as he also envisages a leaner NASA with private companies doing most of the exploring.

DeGrasse Tyson said it was easy to give a space speech in Florida's Brevard County, where the engineers and scientists live and the launches happen, but it was another thing doing it in Idaho and Vermont where NASA has no centers.

"At the end of the day it's taxpayer money," he said. "You can't just go to the moon and Mars because you feel like it, because you have a couple of entrepreneurs."

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