

## 2 U.S. astronauts board SpaceX rocket for historic launch

May 27 2020, by Marcia Dunn

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NASA astronauts Douglas Hurley, left, and Robert Behnken wave as they walk out of the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building on their way to Pad 39-A, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on a SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will blast into orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

With thunderstorms threatening a delay, two NASA astronauts climbed aboard a SpaceX rocket ship Wednesday for liftoff on a history-making flight that was seen as a giant leap forward for the booming business of commercial space travel.

Space veterans Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken were scheduled to ride into orbit aboard the brand-new Dragon capsule on top of a Falcon 9 rocket, taking off for the International Space Station at 4:33 p.m. EDT from the same launch pad used during the Apollo moon missions a half-century ago.

Smiling, waving and giving the traditional thumbs-up, the two men said farewell to their families—exchanging blown kisses and pantomiming hugs for their young sons from a coronavirus-safe distance—before setting out for the pad in a gull-wing Tesla SUV, another product from SpaceX's visionary founder, Elon Musk.

Both President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence arrived to watch the liftoff.

The flight would mark the first time a private company sent humans into orbit.

It would also be the first time in nearly a decade that the United States launched astronauts into orbit from U.S. soil. Ever since the space shuttle was retired in 2011, NASA has relied on Russian spaceships launched from Kazakhstan to take U.S. astronauts to and from the space station.



NASA astronauts Douglas Hurley, left, and Robert Behnken ride a Tesla SUV from the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building on their way to Pad 39-A, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on a SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will blast into orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

With 2 1/2 hours to go before liftoff, controllers put the chances of launch at just 40 percent because of thunderstorms at NASA's Kennedy Space Center. Thunder could be heard as the astronauts made their way to the pad, and a tornado warning was issued moments after they climbed into their capsule.

In the event of a postponement, the next launch opportunity would be Saturday.

The preparations took place in the shadow of the coronavirus outbreak that has killed an estimated 100,000 Americans.

"We're launching American astronauts on American rockets from American soil. We haven't done this really since 2011, so this is a unique moment in time," NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine said.

With this launch, he said, "everybody can look up and say, 'Look, the future is so much brighter than the present.' And I really hope that this is an inspiration to the world."



NASA astronauts Douglas Hurley, left, and Robert Behnken wave as they walk

out of the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building on their way to Pad 39-A, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on a SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will blast into orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/John Raoux)

Musk, wearing a mask and keeping his distance, chatted with the two NASA astronauts just before they left for the launch pad. The mission would put Musk and SpaceX in the same league as only three countries—Russia, the U.S. and China, which sent astronauts into orbit in that order.

"What today is about is reigniting the dream of space and getting people fired up about the future," he said in a NASA interview.

A solemn-sounding Musk said he felt his responsibilities most strongly when he saw the astronauts' wives and sons just before launch. He said he told them: "We've done everything we can to make sure your dads come back OK."

NASA pushed ahead with the launch despite the viral outbreak but kept the guest list at Kennedy extremely limited and asked spectators to stay at home. Still, beaches and parks along Florida's Space Coast are open again, and hours before the launch, cars and RVs already were lining the causeway in Cape Canaveral.



In this Wednesday, May 27, 2020 image from video made available by SpaceX, NASA astronauts Bob Behnken, background left, and Doug Hurley perform communication checks in the Crew Dragon capsule before launch from the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. (SpaceX via AP)



Storm clouds pass over the Vehicle Assembly Building as the SpaceX Falcon 9, with the Crew Dragon spacecraft on top of the rocket, sits on Launch Pad 39-A Wednesday, May 27, 2020, at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch Wednesday, weather permitting. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



NASA astronauts Douglas Hurley, left, and Robert Behnken smile outside the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on a SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will blast into orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/John Raoux)





This Wednesday, May 27, 2020 image from video made available by SpaceX shows the Crew Dragon capsule before launch from the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., later in the day. (SpaceX via AP)



Cars park in a vacant lot in a Titusville, Fla. to watch the launch of SpaceX Falcon 9 with NASA astronauts Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken in the Dragon crew capsule, Wednesday, May 27, 2020 from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Fla. The two astronauts are set to travel on the SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will travel to space aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)



In this photo provided by NASA, astronauts Douglas Hurley, left, and Robert Behnken wave as they leave the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building on their way to Pad 39-A, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on a SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will blast into orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (Bill Ingalls/NASA via AP)



Astronaut Doug Hurley waves out the window as he and astronaut Bob Behnken ride out to the SpaceX Falcon 9, with the Crew Dragon spacecraft on top of the rocket, on Launch Pad 39-A, Wednesday, May 27, 2020, at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch Wednesday afternoon. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



CEO of SpaceX, Elon Musk, talks to the media and NASA personnel, after astronauts Douglas Hurley, left, and Robert Behnken departed the Neil A. Armstrong Operations and Checkout Building on their way to Pad 39-A, at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. The two astronauts will fly on a SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will blast into orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/John Raoux)



A NASA helicopter escorts the crew to Launch Pad 39-A, Wednesday, May 27, 2020, at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla. Two astronauts will fly on the SpaceX Demo-2 mission to the International Space Station scheduled for launch Wednesday. (AP Photo/David J. Phillip)



A pelican pauses on a barrier in front of the SpaceX Falcon 9, where NASA astronauts Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken in the Dragon crew capsule, will lift off from Pad 39-A at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., Wednesday, May 27, 2020. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will takeoff towards orbit aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara)



A woman walks to her spot along Indian Creek Lagoon in a Titusville, Fla. to watch the launch of SpaceX Falcon 9 with NASA astronauts Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken in the Dragon crew capsule, Wednesday, May 27, 2020 from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Fla. The two astronauts are set to travel on the SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will travel to space aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)





Spectators wait in a Titusville, Fla. park for the launch of SpaceX Falcon 9 with NASA astronauts Doug Hurley and Bob Behnken in the Dragon crew capsule, Wednesday, May 27, 2020, from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Fla. The two astronauts will travel on the SpaceX test flight to the International Space Station. For the first time in nearly a decade, astronauts will travel to space aboard an American rocket from American soil, a first for a private company. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)

The space agency also estimated 1.7 million people were watching the launch preparations online during the afternoon.

Among the sightseers was Erin Gatz, who came prepared for both rain and pandemic. Accompanied by her 14-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son, she brought face masks and a small tent to protect against the

elements.

She said the children had faint memories of watching in person one of the last shuttle launches almost a decade ago when they were preschoolers.

"I wanted them to see the flip side and get to see the next era of space travel," said Gatz, who lives in Deltona, Florida. "It's exciting and hopeful."

Hurley, 53, and Behnken, 49, are both two-time shuttle fliers.

NASA hired SpaceX and Boeing in 2014 to transport astronauts to the space station in a new kind of public-private partnership. Development of SpaceX's Dragon and Boeing's Starliner capsules took longer than expected, however. Boeing's ship is not expected to fly astronauts into space until early 2021.

"We're doing it differently than we've ever done it before," Bridenstine said. "We're transforming how we do spaceflight in the future."

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