

The United States should significantly increase space exploration

Key Terms

Aerospace
Dual-Use Technology
NASA

Sources

New York Times Space Page
<http://nytimes.com/pages/science/space/index.html>
Space Operations Links Page
<http://www.maxwell.af.mil/au/aul/school/pmcs/nq13econ.htm>
Space Policy Institute
<http://www.gwu.edu/%7Espi/>

Fact Set

- China recently became the third nation to launch humans into space.
- The United States space program grounded its space exploration after the 2003 Columbia crash. As of late 2004, the program was still not operational.

Arguments in support of the US increasing space exploration

- Space exploration provides jobs for employees of the aerospace industry. This industry is vital to the economy, already employing well over half a million people in the U.S. Increasing space exploration would create more jobs.
- Space exploration would focus the aerospace industry on peaceful spacecraft production. When the aerospace industry is not making spacecraft they are usually making weapons. This was the case in Britain, when its British Aerospace company stepped up its sale of weapons abroad after Britain decided not to participate in the International Space Station.
- Space exploration helps the nation focus on achieving a peaceful goal. Space exploration captured the imagination of Americans in the 1960s and could function as a uniting force today as well.
- As the Earth's population increases towards 10 billion people, it might be necessary to seek resources outside planet Earth. The United States should take advantage of its developed space program and start exploring space for these resources now.
- Space exploration would help us track asteroids or other pieces of space debris that are on a collision path with Earth. Identifying these objects before they enter Earth's atmosphere is our only hope of averting a disastrous impact that could destroy the planet as we know it.
- Landing on other planets such as Mars might answer the question of whether there is life outside Earth.

Arguments against the US increasing space exploration

- Space exploration is expensive. The President's 2004 budget included \$3.97 billion on the space shuttle alone. Increasing space exploration would require spending much more money on NASA at a time of budget deficits, high military spending and tax cuts.
- Space exploration does not have significant scientific benefits. According to Theodore Postol, professor of science, technology and national security policy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the science done by astronauts in space "is marginal science or it's not science at all."
- Tools for space exploration are typically dual-use technologies that have military as well as scientific benefits. Increasing space exploration would increase development of new space weapons.
- Space exploration is dangerous for astronauts being sent into space. The 2003 Columbia shuttle disaster reminds us that space exploration might result in the death of astronauts.
- Space exploration produces space junk. Increasing space junk increases the danger of spacecraft or satellites colliding with junk and the chances of junk crashing into Earth.

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Discussion Questions

- What goals might increased space exploration achieve?
- Is exploring space worth the expense? Why or why not?
- What resources would be necessary to increase space exploration? How would those resources trade off with other public policy goals?
- How should the actions of other nations in space impact the decisions of the United States?