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Decision on space shuttle flights no longer up-in-air

Obama shelves manned space program, reveals new strategy for deep space exploration

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla.-- President Barack Obama unveiled his new plans for space exploration that would lead American astronauts on new journeys.

Speaking at the Kennedy Space Center Thursday, Obama pledged his full commitment to the space program, outlining a strategy that ends current programs while funding new initiatives intended to propel humans farther into the solar system. He spoke about journeys to an asteroid and then to Mars. "I expect to be around to see it," he said.

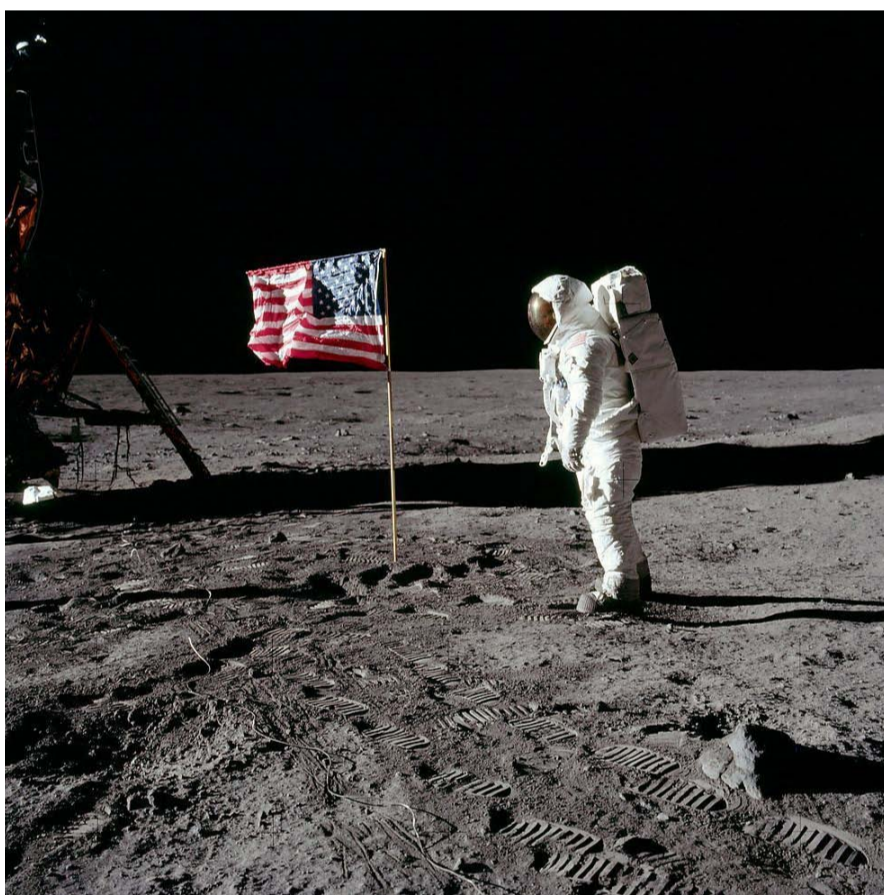
"We want to leap into the future, not to continue on the same path as before," Obama said as he sought to reassure NASA workers that America's space adventures would continue despite the impending termination of space shuttle flights.

The five-year plan involves a \$6 billion increase in NASA's budget and additional support for new space technologies. It relies on private companies to fly to the space station, giving them the funding to build their own rockets and ships. It also extends the space station's life by five years and puts billions into research to eventually develop new government rocket ships for future missions to a nearby asteroid, to the moon, to Martian moons or other points in space. These stops would be stepping stones on an eventual mission to Mars.

NASA's space shuttle will be retired at the end of this year, leaving the Russian Soyuz capsules as the only avenue to space until commercial ventures are ready to do the job.

Allard Beutel, news chief at the Kennedy Center, said that layoffs at the center will likely reach the 7,000 range with the end of the shuttle and cancellation of the Constellation program.

Several noted astronauts were not so sure of Obama's vision for the future, stating in a letter that his planned manned space



The first astronauts landed on the Moon in 1969

flights will place the United States in a "second or even third-rate status" as a space-faring nation.

The letter was signed by the first and last men to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong from Apollo 11. Eugene Cernan from

Apollo 17, and James Lovell, who commanded the heroic Apollo 13 flight.

"Without the skill and experience that actual spacecraft operation provides, the USA is far too likely to be on a long downhill slide to mediocrity," the letter said. "America must decide if it wishes to remain a leader in space. If it does, we should institute a program which will give us the very best chance of achieving that goal."

Space shuttle designs began early

NASA began early studies of space shuttle designs in 1968, a year before the Apollo moon landing a year later. In 1969, President Richard Nixon formed the Space Task Group chaired by

Vice President Spiro Agnew. They evaluated the shuttle studies to date, and recommended a national space strategy, including building a reusable space shuttle which was formally launched on Jan. 5, 1972.

The first fully functional Shuttle Orbiter was the Columbia, built in Palmdale, California. It was delivered to the Kennedy Space Center on March 25, 1979 and was first launched on April 12, 1981. --the 20th anniversary of Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin's space flight with a crew of two.

Challenger was next, delivered to the center in July, 1982, followed by Discovery in Nov. 1983 and Atlantis in April 1985. Challenger was destroyed when it disintegrated during ascent on Jan. 28, 1986, with the loss of all seven astronauts on board.

Endeavor was built to replace her using spare parts originally intended for the other Orbiters and delivered in May 1991. It was launched a year later. Columbia was lost with all seven crew members during a re-entry on Feb. 2001 and has not been replaced.

A nation grieves

World leaders to attend state funeral for Polish President Lech Kaczynski and wife

WARSAW, Poland-- Poland's President Lech Kaczynski and first lady Maria Kaczynski will be buried Sunday in Krakow's

historic Wawel cathedral.

The 1,000 year-old cathedral is the place where Poland's

greatest figures from the past are buried, including medieval kings, Adam Mickiewicz and Josef Pilsudski who led the struggle for independence in 1918-22. World leaders including President Barack Obama, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are expected to attend the funeral.

The last Polish leader killed in office was General Wladyslaw Sikorski, the exiled World War II leader who died in a mysterious plane crash off Gibraltar in 1943. He is also buried there.

The body of Ryszard Kaczorowski, the last president of Poland's government-in-exile in London, was brought back on Wednesday and was also put on public display.

Kaczynski's body was flown home from Russia on Tuesday and parliament held a special observance in memory of the president and lawmakers killed in the plane crash Saturday April 10. The coffin was met by his only child, Marta, and twin brother Jaroslaw.

If Kaczynski, a former prime minister, wants to run in the election likely to be held June 20, the funeral will provide a unique prelude to the opening of his campaign. He has said nothing about his intentions.

The election will determine whether Prime Minister Donald Tusk's Civic Platform party can consolidate power and deliver measures that many investors favor as promoting greater economic stability. His party needs the presidency to advance the program of moving toward euro adoption, narrowing the budget deficit and selling assets. Lech Kaczynski, founder of the opposition Law & Justice party, had sought to block parts of that agenda.

Kaczynski's aging Tupolev 154 plane crashed in thick fog near Smolensk in western Russia, killing all 96 people aboard.

The bodies of the crash victims included Kaczynski's wife, the top brass of Poland's armed forces and opposition lawmakers.

All aboard had been traveling to Russia to attend a memorial in nearby Katyn forest where thousands of Polish military officers were executed 70 years ago by Josef Stalin's secret police.

The pilot had been warned of bad weather in Smolensk and was advised by traffic controllers to land elsewhere, which would have delayed the Katyn observances. Russian traffic controllers said the crew refused to follow their recommendations.

Traffic controller Anatoly Muravyev, who was part of the team directing the plane, said the head controller three times ordered the plane re-attempt the landing and then advised the pilot to get ready to fly to another airport.



Soldiers carried flag-draped coffin of President Lech Kaczynski after arriving from Russia earlier this week