Can Bolden Banish NASA Blues?

Obama’s nominee tries to rally public support on eve of moon landing anniversary as an expert panel and Congress worry that NASA has lost its way

Next week marks 40 years since NASA first put men on the moon. But trepidation about the space agency’s future is dampening celebration of that milestone achievement. “NASA is not what it was,” declared the chair of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation committee during last week’s confirmation hearing for Charles Bolden Jr., President Barack Obama’s choice to lead the agency.

Rather than inspiring the nation with wondrous feats of science and exploration, said Senator Jay Rockefeller (D–WV), NASA is adrift. The agency’s biggest fan on Capitol Hill agrees. “That magic is gone,” bemoaned Senator Bill Nelson (D–FL), who once flew on the soon-to-be-retired shuttle. Even Bolden, a 62-year-old retired Marine general and astronaut, joined the chorus of gloom during a hearing in which legislators lauded his fitness for the job.

But some remedies to this midlife crisis are emerging. The day before Bolden testified, the National Academies’ National Research Council (NRC) released a report urging the space agency to link its efforts to broader national goals. Both the report and Bolden suggest that NASA support more basic research, as it once did, and take the lead in monitoring the environment. Both thrusts will require greater cooperation with other nations, they add.

The biggest question facing NASA is whether the 2004 vision of President George W. Bush to return humans to the moon by 2020 and then on to Mars is still alive. During the presidential campaign, Obama promised to build a large new rocket that can put humans back on the lunar surface, and Bolden told senators that is still in the cards. “We will go on to the moon,” he said. But he avoided mention of any timeline and left up in the air the second phase of Bush’s vision. “I want to go to Mars,” Bolden declared, before noting that this would be at least a 20-year venture.

Next month, a blue-ribbon panel chaired by retired aerospace executive Norman Augustine will lay out options for the replacement of the shuttle and whether it will be designed with a lunar base and a Mars mission in mind. But the more salient issue is how the White House will react.

The academies’ report makes some suggestions. America’s Future in Space: Aligning the Civil Space Program with National Needs argues that NASA needs shaking up so that “a disciplined space program can serve larger national imperatives.” Toward that end, the panel recommends that NASA create a nimble research shop modeled on the Defense Department’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

In his Senate testimony, Bolden strongly backed a renewed emphasis on basic science and engineering, particularly aeronautics. His nominated deputy, Lori Garver, told legislators that she foresees “a great future in utilizing the space station for biomedical research” once the orbiting facility is completed. She said the research would focus on human diseases, an area largely ignored by the Bush Administration, and on preparing astronauts for long stints in space.

The academy report and Bolden also agree that NASA must revitalize its Earth-observation system and work with other countries to gather data on the planet’s environmental health. Strengthening international ties is essential on other fronts, too, NASA science chief Edward Weiler warned researchers meeting last week in Washington, D.C.: “On our own, we can’t do what people would like us to.”

Mars is a case in point. “We no longer have a viable Mars program,” Weiler confessed to a planetary science decadal study group. To help build one, NASA and the European Space Agency tentatively agreed early this month at a meeting in Plymouth, U.K., on a cooperative Mars robotic exploration effort. Although details from that meeting have yet to be made public, one NASA official said that finding life on the Red Planet is high on the list.

The NRC study also urged NASA to expand its roster of partners in human exploration beyond Europe, Japan, Canada, and Russia. Neither Bolden nor the White House has spoken publicly about this idea, but several Washington officials predicted that Obama’s efforts to strengthen relationships with other countries, notably China and India, will eventually include space cooperation.

The former shuttle pilot also expects help from the private sector. “The government cannot fund everything we want to do,” he said, calling for entrepreneurs to take a larger role.

Bolden, who grew up in South Carolina during segregation and who would be the first African American to lead NASA, faced no tough questions during the hearing. Nelson, who accompanied Bolden on a 1985 shuttle mission, called him an “overcomer” of personal, racial, and professional barriers. Concerns about his role as an aerospace consultant appear to have dissipated.

The Senate is expected to confirm Bolden easily although not necessarily before it goes on holiday in August. Once he takes the helm, Bolden’s biggest challenge will be to win support from the White House for a new approach to space exploration that fires the imagination of Congress and the public. If he fails, the agency may be left celebrating past triumphs rather than working toward future milestones.

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