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DURHAM, N.H. -- With President George W. Bush's announcement yesterday to invest more in the space program, researchers at the University of New Hampshire's Space Science Center caution that the President's support for manned Moon/Mars exploration are expensive and may detract from other important missions.

"Americans can be justifiably intrigued, inspired by, and proud of their manned space program," says Roy Torbert, director of UNH's Space Science Center, "but I am skeptical of the budgetary resources allocated for this ambitious program."

Torbert notes that if Apollo missions were to be done today, with the more cumbersome procedures that NASA now uses, estimates could range from $300 billion to $400 billion. He explains costs for the expansion outlined by President Bush yesterday would exceed even that. Torbert also believes the International Space Station should be used as a launch platform for moon colonization and deeper exploration into space.

"I hope the proposal gets careful review, and whatever is decided, proper support so that such programs achieve success and are not abandoned midway, resulting in the despair of failure, rather than the inspiration that we all want from the space effort," Torbert said.

UNH Space Scientist Mark McConnell notes that there is still much to learn from the International Space Station, especially about long-term stays in space. And, he adds, phasing out the Space Shuttle and the Space Station will not likely cover the full cost of a Moon/Mars program. Bush's plans call for a budget boost for NASA of $1 billion spread over five years. The agency's 2004 budget is nearly $15.5 billion.

"Although the Moon may provide a good test bed for technologies that could be used on Mars, the Space Station is a good test bed for technologies and other studies, such as physiological research, that would be important for the trip to and from Mars," McConnell says.

He also worries that it is easier for critics to attack a Moon/Mars program than it is for them to attack the work of the space station, which can help address environmental issues on Earth.

While McConnell concedes prospects for science on the Moon are exciting, he too fears the financial commitment would be difficult to secure. "We currently are not committed to the space station, even with the support of our international partners."
He adds, “I would expect that the commitment for Bush's program -- especially the long-term commitment that would be required -- may not be a strong one. This is especially true, given the large budget deficits that the country now faces.”

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