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Paper #4
Journalism 599
Reporting Decisions
5/11/09

Obscured Vision

That giant leap might take longer than anticipated, at least if Americans will be the ones taking off for mankind to the moon and Mars.

Newspapers, blogs and broadcast outlets brought news May 9 that Barack Obama's presidential administration ordered an independent panel to re-examine NASA's human spaceflight program, a move that could shift American priorities beyond the Earth's atmosphere.¹ The same weekend movie goers were once more whisked away to explore the final frontier as depicted in a new *Star Trek* film, it was becoming clear no one in the real world was likely to boldly go where no one has gone before, at least not any time soon.

The announcement of this new panel was the latest in a long running storyline that by some accounts stretches as far back as the 1950s, when rocket scientist Werner Von Braun articulated his “Von Braun Paradigm,” which mapped the American path into space. This paradigm guided American space policy, providing what the *New York Times* described in 2004 as:

“[A] blueprint [which] read like NASA's achievements of the past four decades: launching astronauts into orbit, sending astronauts to the Moon, the space shuttle, a space station. Only the order was changed when President John F. Kennedy made the push for sending people to the Moon. That goal was originally supposed to come after the space shuttle and the space station.”²

Indeed, the panel's creation also draws attention to the fact that this isn't the first time in

1 Chang, Kenneth, “New Panel Will Review NASA's Shift in Spaceflight.” *The New York Times*, May 7, 2009, Accessed May 10, 2009 at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/08/science/space/08nasa.html?ref=global-home>>

2 Chang, Kenneth, “On to the Moon, And to Mars, Via von Braun,” *The New York Times*. Jan. 14, 2004. A 16.

recent memory that a President has led a re-evaluation of the space program. Indeed, it marks new turbulence for a dramatic but initially vague plan to return to the Moon and Mars that was laid out by the administration of the previous President, George W. Bush. That plan, known as the “Vision for Space Exploration,” was first articulated in 2004. It called for retiring the space shuttle by 2010 in preparation for plans to bring humans back to the moon some time between 2015 and 2020, followed by a manned mission to Mars.

That plan was itself strongly situated along the Von Braun paradigm storyline, a fact news coverage did do a good job of acknowledging. “The Von Braun paradigm has been played out almost religiously since it was first enunciated in the 1950s,” the *New York Times* quoted Roger Launius, NASA's chief historian and the chair of the division of space history at the National Air and Space Museum. “It was very logical. It's easy to grasp.” In one respect, the Vision for Space Exploration was positioned as a return to the American exploratory spirit. In another, it was specifically placed in this timeline. Returning to the moon and delivering humanity to Mars was not about science for the Bush Administration. It was about history. It was about national pride.

While the Obama administration's recent announcement doesn't necessarily mean the Vision for Space Exploration plan is threatened, it could raise new concerns about the feasibility of manned space exploration as envisioned during the previous administration. Although the panel may discuss topics unrelated to the five-year-old plan, the fact it has been convened illustrates how no story ever really goes away. No situation is defined by any one decision.

In the interest of focus, though, and for the purpose of highlighting a specific decision, this paper explores how the Vision for Space Exploration came to pass and how the evolution of

the program was covered by journalists. Specifically, it focuses on coverage beginning roughly in late 2003 and continuing through the following year, when the vision was announced.

By December 2003, word was beginning to spread that the administration was preparing for a major announcement related to space travel. Newspapers and television networks, some better sourced and better informed than others, started running stories postulating about what could be expected from the imminent announcement.

By January 14, when the Vision was publicly unveiled, the tone of the stories remained speculative, as the Bush administration tightly controlled the message of the new plan, a subject this paper will return to. Moreover, while stories about the Vision for Space Exploration were prevalent upon front pages and in news broadcasts immediately following the announcement, they vanished from mainstream media outlets almost as fast as they arrived.

News outlets rarely returned to the subject of the Vision for Space Exploration later in the year. When they did, coverage was usually prompted by the announcement of independent reviews of the feasibility of the plan to return to the moon and Mars, or by book releases and other events associated with space exploration. By the fall of 2004, outside individuals and entities not privy to the discussion taking place before the January announcement had a chance and time to consult publicly released information in order to conduct their own reviews of the program. Other coverage during this period included a handful of analytical pieces and other coverage included broader views of the situation than existed in accounts when the plan was announced. These broader views allowed journalists to better unravel the “story” behind the decision, to define the story in a way that offers audiences better insight into the situation.

Interestingly, while these pieces went into greater depth coverage of the actual

announcement was generally significantly shallower. This is true for breaking news coverage of the announcement as well as the anticipatory pieces which were prevalent in early January.

It's almost as if the movement of the space program story to the front page from science sections and deep within news sessions sacrificed the knowledgeable, specialist's approach some journalists effectively employed. True, general assignment reporters penning breaking news stories might not be expected to get to the depth of a specialist, trading depth for timeliness. On the other hand, it shouldn't have been too difficult for journalists to employ some variation of Neustadt and May's methodology for assessing a situation. They should have been placing the story better. They should have been asking journalists' questions (particularly the why's and who's and how's). They certainly should have asked "what's the story?" and identified the proper placement of the subjects involved.

Instead, much of the content describing the announcement borrowed heavily from the White House's official framing of the Vision for Space Exploration. News stories seized on the dramatic imagery of the proposed program as an extension of American pioneerism. They borrowed heavily from a "Lewis and Clark" narrative presented by the Bush Administration. Where the coverage did get more critical, both print and broadcast outlets at the time of the announcement primarily discussed the potential economic costs of the new program.

The story of the Vision for Space Exploration is in many ways the story of the Bush administration, an examination into just how the "Great Decider" made his decisions. It was also part of another timeline: one more personal to Bush. One of the past presidents to attempt to continue the thread of the Von Braun Paradigm with a journey to Mars was Bush's father, George H.W. Bush.³ In the face of Congressional opposition, however, he failed.

3 Wald, Matthew L. and Singer, David E. "Bush is weighing moon and Mars missions," *The International Herald*

Regardless of whether or not Bush could win votes from the announcement, some newspapers did grasp the possibility may have been part of the Bush administration's consideration in preparing it. The *Washington Post's* news coverage, for example, did a better job than most news outlets of addressing the political storyline involved in the rollout of the Vision. It clearly noted that the announcement came just days before the Iowa caucus and noted the plan:

“[Had] a partly political genesis, with presidential advisers saying that it emerged from a White House search for a bold goal that would help unify the nation before Bush's reelection race and portray him as visionary. Officials said that Bush had always planned to reexamine NASA's mission, but the disintegration of Columbia was the immediate catalyst.”⁴

The idea that Bush's advisors found a political advantage in using the space announcement to advance an image of the President as a unifier and visionary is insightful. The invocation of Lewis and Clark and the placement of the vision for space exploration within the mythology of American exploration was clearly part of the same propaganda machine that created the “War on Terrorism” and the patriotic fervor of post September 11 America. The *Post* succeeded in drawing the political calculation at work here. Other publications also noted the effort to use the decision to reinforce the President's image as a visionary, but didn't ask, or at least explain, why that persona was necessary.

It may have been somewhat obvious, but they still should have spelled out the relationship between image-making and the presidency, especially with Bush gearing up for his 2004 re-election campaign. Importantly, the announcement was made only days before the Iowa Caucus, allowing Bush the opportunity to draw attention away from the contest between the

Tribune. Jan. 10, 2004. Pg. 1.

4 Allen, Mike and Pianin, Eric “Bush Outlines Space Agenda, President Calls for Moon Trip by 2020,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 15 2004. A 01

candidates vying to run as his Democratic opponents.

Still, the media took notice when Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich famously joked that the new space plan might be inappropriate while the U.S. fought two wars because: "I've been wondering why the president would, while we're still in Iraq, talk about going to the moon or going to Mars. Maybe he's looking for the weapons of mass destruction still."⁵

This joke would become a staple on Kucinich's stump, but journalists did not do enough to follow it up. Whether with the Congressman or his fellow Democratic presidential candidates, few reporters discussed how the space announcement might illustrate any differences between presidential challengers and George W. Bush, and few made a strong effort to investigate what political motivations might be behind the plan.

While the timing of the announcement so near start of the 2004 electoral cycle was noted, as in a Jan. 9 *New York Times* piece previewing the unveiling of the space plan, few papers fleshed out the relationship between the two events. Still, the preview in the *Times* did characterize some of the political strategy involved with the announcement, a strategy that relied on the White House selling the appropriately-named Vision for Space Exploration as a grand re-articulation of the nation's destiny:

"The announcement ... would signal the second major policy initiative put forward by the White House at the beginning of an election year. Both new policy directives would allow the president to be portrayed as an inspirational leader whose vision goes beyond terrorism and tax cuts," the *Times* analysis reasoned. "They also would have the added political benefit of diverting attention from the Democratic presidential candidates trudging through the retail **politics** of the Iowa caucuses."⁶

Writing for his *Washington Post* column, meanwhile, Charles Krauthammer drew attention to

5 ["American Morning," CNN, January 12, 2004. Accessed May 9 2009 at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0401/12/lm.05.html>.](http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0401/12/lm.05.html)

6 Wald and Singer, *International Herald Tribune*.

Kucinich's joke and a similar jab by David Letterman about the Vision for Space Exploration. Krauthammer pointed out how he had written an article for the *Weekly Standard* urging a plan similar to the new vision.⁷ Krauthammer's worldview squares with the former president's, so it's not surprising he favors paying tribute to the drama and romance of the space program as a revival. The columnist re-inforces the depiction of the plan as part of some grand drama. His placement of the Columbia disaster nearly a year earlier as an event “made painfully clear what some of us have been saying for years: It is not only pointless to continue orbiting endlessly around the Earth; it is ridiculously expensive and indefensibly risky” allows Krauthammer to frame the discussion of the tragedy as a historic turning point in a way that makes his rhetoric eerily reminiscent of that used by him and others to situate the September 11, 2001 attacks in contemporary history.

Krauthammer didn't, however, laud George W. Bush with praise. Instead he chastised the then-President for the themes of unity and vision with which the new plan was spun: “This was as clumsy as President Bush 41 saying 'Message: I care' or Howard Dean discovering Jesus as he heads south. If you are going to do something blatantly political, don't telegraph it.” In his column, Krauthammer wrote. “This presentation was particularly stupid because I believe this plan would have been proposed exactly as is, with or without an election year, with or without the phony Kennedy overlay. In fact, there is not an ounce of political advantage in this proposal.”

Whether Krauthammer is correct about the political advantage, his argument is somewhat flawed by his own employment of dramatic elements later in his column. Reading his piece it seems returning to the moon and Mars represents nothing short of destiny.

Elsewhere, publications covering the announcement also described how the

⁷ Krauthammer, Charles, “A Modest Proposal,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 16 2004. Editorial, A19.

administration tried to place the event on a historical timeline. *USA Today*, for example, noted that Eugene Cernan, the last man to walk on the moon, attended the speech.⁸ That paper also explicitly claimed, like Krauthammer, that the decision to re-imagine NASA's mission was prompted by the Columbia disaster, again furthering the dramatic narrative of the nation rising from tragedy.

By contrast, *United Press International* may have done the best job of telling the story of the decision to return to the Moon and Mars. In an exhaustive examination of the plan published just two days after the plan was publicly announced — the third in a three-part series — writers Frank Sietzen and Keith L. Cowing explored the series of events that led up to the unveiling of the new plan, providing far and away the most detailed examination of the decision-making process that took place in the Bush White House.⁹

In fact, Sietzen and Cowing were the only journalists to really depict how the team devising the new space policy evolved from a casual meeting of space-crazy junior staffers to more formal discussions of key national security staff. Six months after the announcement, Sietzen and Cowing released a book detailing the evolution of this discussion. While a July 14, 2004 preview of the book suggests just how detailed their reporting went, even the series surrounding the space plan's announcement describes both how the Vision for Space Exploration was really the culmination of a series of smaller, private but influential decisions. It also sheds light on the calculations that took place as White House staffers tried to determine just how to roll out the plan in a way that would best obscure these small steps but maintain the visionary illusion previously discussed in this paper. Interestingly, it also credits Bush with coming up with

8 Watson, Traci and Benedetto, Richard, "Return to moon outlined by Bush," *USA Today* Jan. 15 2004, A1

9 Cowing, Kieth L. and Sietzen, Frank "Beyond the moon: Inside Bush's space plan." *United Press International*, Jan. 16 2004

the dramatic imagery:

“As the discussions moved toward a final choice — the moon and then perhaps onward — Bush turned to Cheney. 'This is more than just the Moon, isn't it?' he asked. Bush said he saw the policy as being more than picking a destination in space and then going there. Rather, it was more about going out into the solar system to accomplish a broader set of objectives. It should put to rest once and for all the decades-old and somewhat tired argument that space exploration was best performed by robots, not people. The new policy should embrace an intermix of human and robotic missions — all focused toward a common goal of exploration ... The more Bush had thought about the policy, the more he wanted to 'make a big deal about it,' according to an administration source.”

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* was another publication with a bit deeper insight into the announcement of the plan. *Inquirer* reporter Seth Borenstein authored a series of articles surrounding the announcement of the new space plan. On January 11, three days before the announcement, he already raised the idea that there were “obstacles galore for the mars trip,”¹⁰ chief among them how the United States would fund the program. Borenstein continued his coverage with a day-after report on the program's announcement that dared to look behind the curtain the Bush administration held up to further the dramatic imagery of the event. “Yesterday's much-anticipated announcement was heavy on the what and the where of this initiative, but light on the how and the how much.”¹¹ I'd add that the administration even made a case for the “why” of the initiative, even if the why it presented wasn't the why that may actually have been at play.

Anyhow, Borenstein's questioning went further than just noting the lack of a “what” and a “where” and a “how much.” He made an effort to answer these questions himself, following the announcement of the new initiative with an analysis a week after the announcement. In doing so, he was able to capture both the administration's thinking, quoting Nasa Administrator Sean O'Keefe as saying questions about the program “close off options,” and its opponents, who

10 Borenstein, Seth “Obstacles galore for Mars trip; money would be the top issue.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. A02.

11 Borenstein, Seth “Bush launches plan for moon-Mars quest; His proposal for years to come included new exploration vehicles to replacae the shuttles. Cost details, though, were few. Bush eyes mission to Mars.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. A01.

decried such thinking as a “blank check approach.”¹²

Where domestic journalists were primarily focused on the economics behind the new space plan, international publications focused more directly on the political motivations that might have been behind the decision to launch a drive for the moon and Mars. The London *Independent* noted in a Jan. 15 report that the announcement was “criticised by Mr. Bush's critics as an attempt to boost his ratings and cast him as a more “inspirational” leader ahead of November's election.” While the publication might have paid attention to a theme that deserved more attention from the media, this story's impact might have been diminished by the fact that it never clearly spelled out who those critics were who felt Bush was making political calculations.

Unfortunately, this piece continued to feel as if it was missing key reporting where it could potentially have illustrated how foreign media more effectively reported on presidential decision-making than their American counterparts. The *Independent* was one of the few publications to ponder the militarization of space. However, rather than exploring the composition of the panel that developed the new space exploration plan — a panel headed by a Navy admiral and consisting primarily of national security advisors instead of scientists — the newspaper cited a 2001 report commissioned by then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. That report recommended merging air and space operations into a new “Space Corps.”¹³

The only critics of the Bush Administration referenced in the article were nongovernmental organizations which focused on this issue. The problem: this “space corps” idea was not part of the announcement or the plan. While it may have been important to acknowledge this older discussion as having a possible influence on the new vision that was

12 Borenstein, Seth “Moon-Mars Costs? Don't ask NASA,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Jan. 15 2004 Pg. A01.

13 Buncombe, Andrew, “Bush reaches for the stars but starts with base on moon,” *The Independent*, Jan. 15 2004, Pg. 15

articulated, doing so would have required describing a clear timeline of how that proposal evolved into the plan that was announced in 2004. The article would also have benefited by bringing such questions to critics besides NGOs which had no comment on the specifics of the new plan. It was hard to tell whether they were expressing an informed, new criticism, or just continuing to deliver a canned message. With so many critics of the new plan quoted in other media, it's doubtful the *Independent* couldn't have found someone with up-to-date knowledge of the situation to raise important questions about the militarization of space or the politicization of the new announcement.

Still, it shouldn't be ignored that military considerations played a role in the evolution of the Vision for Space Exploration.

“Vice President Cheney persuaded Bush that there could be military benefits, such as space-based defense systems,” *USA Today* reported.¹⁴ But this publication also simplifies the discussion of the inspirational terms in which the announcement was wrapped, suggesting the idea of a grand goal was the singular result of George W. Bush's own vision (thus furthering mythologies about his leadership potential), not months of calculation by a largely secretive and evolving panel. “The president thought that a big goal would inspire and unite Americans, no matter their political affiliation.”

What about the science? Clearly, bringing humans back to the moon for the long term and later delivering them safely to mars will require tremendous scientific accomplishments. Yet few general news outlets described what challenges scientists would need to overcome before embarking on the new mission. This is an important note. If the public was to properly react to

14 Watson, Traci and Keen, Judy, “Moon plan risky on many fronts.” *USA Today*. Jan. 12 2004. 3A

the new plan, and if an accurate assessment of the plan's potential costs and risks were to be made, there would need to be thorough reporting of what was known about getting to the moon and mars, how the past three decades of space travel and technological development may have changed our understanding of journeying through the cosmos, and some articulation of what a we don't yet know.

There were some publications that did take stabs at the science of space exploration. The *St. Petersburg Times* explored the science behind the new vision to try to get a better handle on what the costs of expanded manned exploration of space might be.¹⁵ This sort of approach matters, because it helps the public understand how scientific endeavors fit into and effect their everyday lives. It allows readers to determine for themselves whether or not they think the adventurous imagery articulated by President Bush is worth the cost. It allows them to decide whether they're really willing to buy into this new dream. The *New York Times*, meanwhile, ran a science-section cover on Jan. 20 examining what the new vision might require, and, importantly, outlined alternatives for the program.¹⁶

As it turns out, few stories included this scientific discussion, perhaps because few details were released at the time of the program's announcement by the white house, as evidenced by O'Keefe's comment about questions closing off options. Anybody can say they want to go to the moon and Mars, but this sort of approach is about the opposite of what science is all about. It's not a pursuit where one knows the answers they want to find and then asks the questions. Instead, science revolves around asking questions about the world and the universe as it is today, and building on the discoveries that are made from those questions' answers in order to ask new

15 "President's new space vision: Put humans on Mars, moon," *St. Petersburg Times*. Jan. 9 2004. A1

16 Chang, Kenneth, "New Moon: Planning the return to space." *New York Times*. F-1.

questions. Such an attitude might underscore the fact that few scientists were involved in the decision to retool NASA's approach.