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Commercial Spaceflight: All Systems Go

NASA should push the frontiers. The private sector can handle the business of low Earth orbit.

The following is by astronauts Buzz Aldrin, Ken Bowersox, Jake Garn, Robert Gibson, Hank Hartsfield, John Herrington, Byron Lichtenberg, John Lounge, Rick Searfoss, Norman Thagard, Kathryn Thornton, Jim Voss and Charles Walker:

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As crew members who have flown aboard spacecraft such as America's Space Shuttle and the International Space Station, we know that exploring space is a worthwhile and challenging endeavor. Increased use of public-private partnerships—where commercial companies assume a larger role in developing the systems to be used for space transportation—is one promising path to strengthen our nation's space exploration programs. Public-private partnerships can leverage the agility and efficiency of the commercial sector while maintaining access to the skilled workers, technologies and facilities only available in the government.

The best place to exercise and grow these space-exploration partnerships is in low Earth orbit, where humans have the most experience and where economic incentives exist to make space travel routine. While it's completely appropriate for NASA to continue developing systems and the new technologies necessary to take crews farther out into our solar system, we believe that the commercial sector is fully capable of safely handling the critical task of low-Earth-orbit human transportation.

So we firmly support the findings of the Augustine Committee, a presidential blue ribbon panel that has endorsed commercial human spaceflight. Sally Ride, one of America's most well-known astronauts and a member of the committee, put it best when she said, "We would like to be able to get NASA

out of the business of getting people to low Earth orbit."

We wholeheartedly agree. NASA should put its unique resources into pushing back the final frontier and not in repaving the earth-to-orbit road it cleared a half century ago. Commercial human spaceflight is not competitive with NASA. It is complementary. Indeed, a strong partnership between NASA and the commercial sector is nothing new. NASA already relies on commercial rockets to launch multibillion-dollar science payloads and NASA is well along in its plans to turn over space station cargo resupply duties to the private sector. The time has come for NASA to build on these successes and embrace commercial crew transportation as well.

As astronauts, we know that safety is important. We are fully confident that the commercial spaceflight sector can provide a level of safety equal to that offered by the venerable Russian Soyuz system, which has flown safely for the last 38 years, and exceeding that of the Space Shuttle. Commercial transportation systems using boosters such as the Atlas V, Taurus II, or Falcon 9 will have the advantage of multiple unmanned flights to build a track record of safe operations prior to carrying humans. These vehicles are already set to fly over 40 flights to orbit in the next four years.

Commercial human spaceflight will also benefit America's economic competitiveness. The aerospace industry has long been one of the few American industries with a positive trade surplus. Strengthening this industry through investment in commercial development will improve the ability of the American aerospace industry to compete with foreign companies. This will result in more dollars spent on aerospace here in America, and more in hi-tech aerospace jobs.

We enthusiastically endorse this robust vision for the future of human spaceflight—a vision in which NASA is free to concentrate on the challenges of exploration beyond low Earth orbit while private commerce enables increased activity in Earth orbit. We strongly agree with the Augustine Committee's endorsement of commercial human spaceflight, and we encourage the White House and Congress to embrace this positive vision for our nation's future in space.