

Letter to the NASA Administrator: Letter Report

National Research Council

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Letter to the NASA Administrator

On March 30, 1992, Space Studies Board Chair Louis J. Lanzerotti sent the following letter to NASA Administrator Richard H. Truly.

At its 105th meeting on February 26-28, 1992, the Space Studies Board was briefed by officials of NASA and of the Congressional Budget Office on NASA's budget request and the national budgetary outlook. The Board also heard a briefing by Space Station Freedom officials on the status of that program, and reviewed a scientific assessment of the CRAF (Comet Rendezvous - Asteroid Flyby) and Cassini (Titan Probe - Saturn Orbiter) missions prepared by a sub-panel of the Board's Committee on Planetary and Lunar Exploration. Based on these briefings, the Space Studies Board has prepared and hereby submits assessments of the evolving Space Station Freedom design and of the CRAF/Cassini mission. A summary of past National Research Council recommendations regarding the Advanced X-ray Astrophysics Facility (AXAF), which is facing a restructuring in response to budget pressures, is also included. These assessments of individual programs are provided in the context of several broader concerns.

It is evident that some difficult programmatic choices have already been made by NASA and, possibly, more remain to be made by Congress. In such times, there is the potential for decisions that could cause serious unintentional damage to major national space research objectives. It is the Board's belief that both Congress and the Administration desire to maintain an effective space and aeronautics program that is responsive to the nation's needs. The four themes expressed in NASA's *Vision 21* plan are viable, but fragile, and the Board believes that the nation may be perilously close to forced decisions that will create an unbalanced NASA program.

The challenges posed by the Administration's budget proposal are clear. The Space Studies Board recognizes that as advisor to the civil space program, it bears responsibility to help evolve an effective management response to budget realities and to help incorporate new technical approaches enabling lower-cost missions. Such actions must be taken rapidly to preserve the positive attributes of a space program that has provided the nation with immense returns in science, technology, and pride of accomplishment.

From one perspective, the NASA program in space science and applications is vital and vigorous. Important missions have been launched in recent years and more are scheduled for 1992, providing a flow of valuable scientific information. From another perspective, however, the program faces a longer-term future in which scientific returns may be greatly diminished. Missions judged to be of high priority (including the Orbiting Solar Laboratory (OSL) and the Space Infrared Telescope Facility (SIRTF)) have been canceled or abandoned. Others (including the Earth Observing System (EOS), the Comet Rendezvous - Asteroid Flyby (CRAF)/Cassini missions, and the Advanced X-ray Astrophysics Facility (AXAF)) are experiencing continuing cost difficulties and are being reevaluated and possibly delayed, descope or canceled. The run-out costs anticipated for key missions exceed realistic estimates of the funds that will be available in the years to come. We recognize that scientists, as others, are subject to the effects of large budget deficits and that research must compete with other national needs. We feel obligated, however, to articulate the consequences of budgetary decisions.

The Space Studies Board plans to continue its reassessment of elements of the space research program in light of existing budget constraints and to develop specific recommendations for the new NASA administrator.