



## Top budget hawk Jeff Sessions still wants U.S. to fly to Mars

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(AP File Photo)

U.S. Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Mobile, is seen here on Sept. 16, 2009. Sessions, who has become one of the GOP's biggest advocates for cutting federal spending, thinks the country should still pay for rockets to Mars. (AP File Photo)

WASHINGTON — The federal government, “in a word, is broke,” said Sen. Jeff Sessions.

But the Mobile Republican, who has become one of the GOP's biggest advocates for cutting federal spending, thinks the country should still pay for rockets to Mars.

“It is the one activity that defines the United States as the world's technological leader,” Sessions said. “If we lose that, and others surpass us ... then I think it will be seen as a passing of the baton.”

Those views are shared by some other fiscally minded Alabama Republicans —

Republicans whose districts include NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville.

Analysts from Washington's liberal and conservative think tanks alike said it's typical in Washington for small-government advocates to make big exceptions for programs that benefit their constituents.

“Huntsville is going to be kind of symbolic of the whole thing,” said Larry Korb, a senior fellow at the left-leaning Center for American Progress. “You've got people wanting to cut the budget — but not cut their areas.”

Benjamin Friedman, a research fellow at the conservative Cato Institute, said he was disappointed, but not surprised, at Sessions' position on NASA programs.

“I'm not entirely sure how much good those programs do us,” Friedman said.

In hearings last week before the Senate Budget Committee, on which Sessions serves as the ranking member, he firmly criticized the U.S. secretaries of education and transportation for increased spending on Pell Grants for poor students attending college, among other programs.

Sessions spoke about budget cuts in language evocative of a 1940 speech by Winston Churchill about fighting Nazi Germany.

"We are going to fight for spending cuts this week, next week, next month, and next year," Sessions said. "We are going to fight for spending cuts in the Budget Committee, in the Appropriations Committee, and on the Senate floor.

"We are going to keep fighting for a leaner, more productive government until we have restored confidence in our economy and put this country back on the right path — the path to prosperity."

But in an interview last month, Sessions said the U.S. should never surrender its lead in space technology to other countries. He added that budget cuts should avoid the high-tech military research conducted in Huntsville's Redstone Arsenal.

Rep. Mo Brooks, a Huntsville Republican elected in November as part of a new, fiscally conservative freshman class in Congress, echoed Sessions' views, saying Washington's powerbrokers recognize Huntsville as a "technological jewel" that should be protected from steep cuts.

"They understand how important what we've done is to our war-fighting capability, and with respect to NASA, our technological achievements," Brooks said, during an interview last month in his congressional office.

While not addressing NASA or Redstone specifically, Sen. Richard Shelby said in a statement that the federal government is critical to Huntsville, as is Huntsville to the "federal government's national defense and technological base."

"I will continue to advocate for Huntsville's role and make my colleagues aware of the tremendous progress made there," Shelby's statement said.

While Sessions and others with districts that include major NASA operations support protecting funding for missions to the Moon and beyond, the Mobile senator acknowledged that the rest of his colleagues in Congress may not feel the same way.

"It's conceivable that this great mass of humanity that represents the United States of America could lose its appetite for space. At least its elected representatives might," he said. "But I don't think the American people have."

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