

America Doesn't Need NASA To Stay On Top In Space

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Free Enterprise: For those worried that America's leadership in spaceflight died with NASA's downsizing, meet SpaceX, a private company that showed Tuesday how capitalism will do what government does and better.

NASA was once the pride of a country fighting a tense Cold War. It planned and executed what is arguably man's greatest achievement. It indeed engineered a giant leap for mankind.

Yet since those lunar landings, the agency has gotten bogged down in politics and bureaucracy, plagued by waste and ambitions that were never reached. Some believe President Obama's decision to cut NASA's budget and the closure of the shuttle program signal the end of manned spaceflight for the U.S. But it doesn't.

In the pre-dawn hours Tuesday, Space Exploration Technologies Corp. successfully launched its Falcon 9 rocket that was topped with the company's Dragon capsule. The unmanned Dragon is on course to dock with the International Space Station, where its 674 pounds of food and supplies will be welcomed by the crew on Friday.

On May 31, Dragon will return to Earth loaded with completed science experiments and other gear it will bring back from the space station.

Eventually, SpaceX will put more than hardware and supplies into orbit. It will put men into space.

If there is a demand for any good or service that isn't being met, the free market will fill the void as long as there is a profit to be earned. Entrepreneurs, such as SpaceX co-founder Elon Musk, won't let a business opportunity slip away. If there is money to be made, space will be commercialized.

A few years ago, Cato Institute Executive Vice President David Boaz blogged that "there is no shortage of interest in space entrepreneurship: wealthy people with a track record of commercial achievement are yearning to get involved."

SpaceX isn't alone in foreseeing a lucrative market in space. In 2010, aerospace giant Boeing announced plans it will enter the space tourism business, with flights starting as soon as 2015.

Space Adventures, a Virginia company that has already arranged spaceflights in Russia's Soyuz flights, has a business model based on clients flying "on suborbital flights, on voyages to Earth orbit and on historic expeditions that circumnavigate the moon."

Virgin Galactic, part of Richard Branson's Virgin Group empire, has plans to take passengers on suborbital flights for \$200,000 a flight. Roughly 500 adventurous passengers have already bought tickets.

Nor is the idea of private-sector space travel a new concept. More than 20 years ago, the Space Frontier Foundation was founded by a group of space community leaders who were dedicated to "opening the space frontier to human settlement as rapidly as possible."