



Gingrich wants to go to the moon

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I've been busy settling into a new day job this week (hence my dearth of United Liberty posts) and haven't been paying a whole lot of attention to the news. But one thing that did appear that caused a firestorm on my Twitter were Newt Gingrich's comments about the moon, specifically, [his plan to build a moon base](#):

To cheers and applause in an area that has suffered major job loss since the cancellation of the space shuttle, Gingrich said, "By the end of my second term, we will have the first permanent base on the moon and it will be American.

"We will have commercial near-Earth activities that include science, tourism and manufacturing, and are designed to create a robust industry precisely on the model of the development of the airlines of the 1930s, because it is in our interest to acquire so much experience in space that we clearly have a capacity that the Chinese and the Russians will never come anywhere close to matching."

He also said that by the end of 2020, the country would have "the first continuous propulsion system in space" capable of allowing people travel to Mars.

"I am sick of being told we have to be timid and I am sick of being told we have to be limited in technologies that are 50 years old," the former House speaker told the crowd at a "space round table" he hosted at a Holiday Inn.

As the resident scifi geek/nerd/whatever here on United Liberty, I feel I must write some sort of response to this. It's precisely the kind of thing that gets me excited and makes me want to jump up and down and say "Hey, let's make *Star Wars* a reality, guys!" (Note, I'm referring to the work of science fiction, not the work of political fiction, the 70s, not the 80s.)

I actually think that a lunar colony is something desirable and something we should probably do. The reasons are many. First, we can create a sort of "backup" for humanity if anything happens to

Earth. (Mars would fit this role much better, mainly because if anything truly terrible happens to Earth—like, said, Haley’s Comet decides to make a pit stop— the Moon would also be in danger, but we can start there.) Second, we could make many economical gains by setting up mining operations on the Moon for rare minerals. Third, hey, low gravity, don’t have to worry about your knees: it’d be a great retirement community. (That was only *half* in jest.) Fourth, like the space program of the 60s and 70s, it would create many new ancillary technologies as we tried to make this happen; for instance, teflon is a product of the original Space Race. And finally, fifth—why the heck not? Why not colonize the Moon? Why not expand out into space? Why not challenge ourselves to do something great and inspiring?

For these and other reasons, I think a lunar colony would be a fantastic idea and really something we should pursue. However, when you look at what Gingrich is really saying, you can tell yourself that, really, this is never going to happen.

First of all, Gingrich is just saying “Let’s colonize the Moon!” to get votes from Florida’s space coast. Does he really believe in colonizing the Moon? I highly doubt it. The man has spouted off ninety ideas a day and I don’t care how stupid you think he is, I don’t think he’s anywhere stupid enough to believe every one of them—or even a majority of them. This is yet another example of a politician making an enormous, grandiose promise to voters, only to never actually make due on said promises. (In Gingrich’s case, because he is never getting near the Oval Office other than as a tourist or a lobbyist.)

Then you have to look at the man’s timetable. Colonize the Moon? Before we get to that, we’d have to set up a transportation and supply system, build infrastructure on the Moon to support habitation, develop new environmental technologies—in short, there’s a whole logistical *universe* that would have to be developed before we could land settlers there. And go to Mars by 2020? I’m not going to say that it’s 100% impossible, but more like 99.9% improbable. That’s only eight years away. We managed to place a man on the Moon within a decade of Kennedy’s proclamation, but only by directing the entire economy to focus on spaceflight, and not having too many other issues to distract public support (aside from Commies, but that tied into the space program too as another front in the Cold War.) Also, the Moon is three days away with 1960s technology; with our best technology today, Mars is—at least—six months away. That’s a totally different scenario you have to engineer for, and it probably will take us more than a decade to get it to work (perhaps longer if we want to implement an [Aldrin Cyclor](#).) And NASA can barely get its behind up into Earth orbit, let alone the orbit of another celestial body.

That leads me to the third problem with Gingrich’s plan, and that is he is aiming to restore NASA and have that government agency direct lunar colonization and Martian holiday packages. That, my friends, is a Kobayashi Maru scenario. Let us not forget that the whole reason that space travel has faltered since the 70s is because of NASA. Because it’s a government agency, by definition it is a beast of politics—or, perhaps more fittingly, a victim of politics. NASA cannot simply market itself to the public and solicit investors and collect resources that way. No, it depends on elected public officials to determine it’s budget and mission, which is supposedly a representation of the American public *in toto*. But the American public is hardly unified on anything ([other than a fear of big government](#), which just sinks it right there.) There is no collective “vision” of the public that would drive NASA to the Moon. As Edward Crane, president of the Cato Institute, pointed out last year, [“Actually, We’re Not All In This Together.”](#)

NASA won’t go to the Moon, because it will become mired in political battles in Washington between a multitude of special interests, and its mission will be torn to shreds. Any hope placed in a government agency for space colonization is misplaced. Fortunately, there is a very workable alternative.

Let the free market expand into space. Already, much of space travel is commercial and privatized, [as I wrote about last year](#):

*That's why the free market can work—let the people who truly care about space exploration give their money and resources freely to the cause, while others who are less interested save their money and resources for other things they support. It's a basic, win-win scenario, and the space industry is one of the areas where private enterprise has been really outperforming the government, and doing it publicly. The Ansari X Prize raised the bar for private and relatively cheap spaceflight, generating a ton of interest and introducing commercial astronauts to our world. Its sequel, the [Google Lunar X Prize](#), is still on track to have private groups (not necessarily for-profits) put an unmanned lander on the Moon by 2015. Richard Branson, of course, is still pushing forward with Virgin Galactic, with over 300 wealthy tourists already signed up for its \$200,000 jaunts; according to the [Fédération Aéronautique Internationale](#), only 517 people total have been to space, so Branson will dramatically increase the astronaut population, in a way that NASA could only dream of. (And there **are a lot of competitors** trying to work out suborbital tourism, too.) [Bigelow Aerospace](#)—my personal favorite—has not one, but two space stations in orbit, both of which happen to be inflatable. (That's right, we don't need to go through super-expensive time consuming module construction, we just inflate a space station now. Available at your local Home Depot for 25% off.) And finally, there's the darling of the space news media—SpaceX, founded by Pay Pal co-founder Elon Musk, and which recently received a \$3 billion contract from NASA to launch “[satellites and potentially astronauts into space](#).” (Naturally, the story worries that they may be “cutting corners,” but from the non-Euclidean mess that is government spaceflight, there are probably a ton of corners to be cut.)*

If we allowed a truly free market to work in space, we'd have a system where those who really want to go into space can pool their resources and do so, while those who prefer to focus on Earth can pool their resources and do that. No political battles, no half-hearted measures. And let's face it, this is the only way it could work. Nobody really wants to go into space anymore, unless you're offering them an Incom T-65 X-Wing starfighter with laser cannons, proton torpedoes, hyperdrives, and a R2 astromech droid copilot. With that kind of interest—“all or nothing”—NASA is going nowhere. Let SpaceX, Bigelow, Virgin Galactic, and other companies (and even nonprofits—private does not necessarily mean “for-profit”) do their best and see where we end up. Will we have a moon colony by 2020 and tourism to Mars? Probably not. But we'll be a lot farther along than NASA will be.

In short, Gingrich, if you really want us to go the Moon like I do, then do us all a favor and get your big behind out of the way. Let the market work, and we'll be there.