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Bipartisanship is, as everyone knows, in short supply in Washington these days. But it has not vanished completely. When Presidential Science Adviser John Holdren and NASA Administrator Charles Bolden unveiled President Obama's new plan for space exploration they encountered unexpectedly strong and dramatic opposition from Democrats and Republicans alike. What produced this rare consensus? Nothing less than a roadmap put forth by these two men for strategic retreat from space leadership.

Seeking to put his stamp on America's storied adventures in rocketry and robotics, the president could have gone boldly in new directions, using past achievements as a springboard to new destinations. But his proposed budget for space exploration describes an approach that is both reckless and naïve. To save money, the proposed budget for fiscal year 2011 would completely abandon the manned space flight program known as Constellation. It is critical to cut the federal budget and reduce costs wherever possible, but the termination of this program is not intended to accomplish either of those laudable goals. Instead it is being used as a sacrificial lamb led to slaughter in the name of more funding for climate change research and "green aviation" technology, among other programs. It's a matter of priorities and in this case the administration has chosen the wrong ones.

Manned spaceflight and exploration is one of the last remaining fields in which the U.S. maintains an undeniable competitive advantage over other nations. Constellation comprises several systems that are well along in development: new booster rockets, a new crew and cargo vehicle, and a lander. The last Space Shuttle flight is scheduled for later this year, and we already face several years of dependence on the Russians for transportation to the International Space Station. Yet, as if this gap weren't bad enough, the administration now proposes to start with a clean sheet of paper.

Recycled paper.

I say recycled because the implied theme of their new plan is: "Better, Faster, Cheaper." Sound familiar? It was the well-intended mantra of Dan Goldin, President Clinton's NASA Administrator. But the myopic focus on cost-cutting at the expense of prudent engineering led to a series of disastrously failed NASA missions during the 1990s. Unfortunately, the lessons of this exercise in false economy seem lost on those who concocted the NASA budget request for next year.

Beyond the strictly technical disruptions of the administration's plan, there is its destructive impact on jobs. The "stop work" approach envisioned in the president's budget request almost guarantees a huge wave of layoffs among our most gifted and productive aerospace workers. Here in Colorado, nearly 900 of our best and brightest work on the Orion crew exploration vehicle. In California, Utah, Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida, thousands of skilled workers -- many of them excited young engineers and technicians -- have poured their hearts into the Constellation program.

This is unquestionably a time of difficult budget decisions and prioritizing for individual Americans as well as the federal government. I strongly advocate for cost cutting and reductions in federal spending but I also believe we need to set national priorities and continued leadership in manned spaceflight and exploration should be one of those priorities. The president and his NASA team have made the wrong choice but can nonetheless still inject new energy and chart new destinations for our astronauts by changing their decision to cancel Constellation.

America's space program has been an engine of innovation since the days of President John F. Kennedy. Much of the modern world that we take for granted, from GPS to cell phones to laptops to the Weather Channel and beyond, is the heritage of our investment in space exploration. Commercial space leader and X Prize winner Burt Rutan summed it up well in a recent letter to Congress, "Two years after Neil and Buzz landed on the moon, America led the world in awarding PhDs in science, engineering, and math. Today we are not even on the first or second page... The motivation of our youth is the most important thing we can do for our nation's long-term security and prosperity."

Cutting back on federal spending and supporting the continued pursuit of manned space exploration are not mutually exclusive. Through setting the right priorities NASA, and in turn America, can continue to lead the world where no one has gone before.

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