

Opening Statement
The Honorable Pete Olson (R-TX), Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics

*Proposed Changes to NASA's Exploration Program: What's Known, What's not, and What are
the Issues for Congress?*

March 24, 2010

Madam Chairwoman, thank you for calling this afternoon's hearing. I'd like to thank our witnesses for their appearance today. Both of these men bring years of valuable experience and perspective. I would especially like to commend Mr. Cooke in particular for his service during what must be, to say the very least, an interesting time at the Agency, especially for his mission directorate.

Madam Chairwoman, I applaud you for your leadership in organizing this Committee's examination of NASA's proposed changes in its human space flight program. There are many questions to be asked – and information yet to be provided – about such a major redirection. Frankly, too many people are behaving as if the changes outlined in the budget proposal are a fait accompli. That is far from the truth and no matter what you feel the ultimate choice should be, there are still too many unknowns and too many trades that must be evaluated before Congress can make an informed decision. This hearing will go a long way toward contributing to that debate.

The President may or may not provide additional details at his appearance on April 15, but until then, in the absence of mission-specific goals and strategies, perception becomes reality. And in that regard rests many of my concerns. Let me share with you a couple of them as examples.

On March 11, a memo was sent out by NASA halting solicitation of outside design submissions for a future lunar lander. This procurement activity was neither a cancelled contract nor a violation of current law, but it does lead me to question the agency's desire to go beyond low earth orbit. It's this kind of judgment call that can demoralize a workforce.

And in regards to workforce, I increasingly am hearing from civil servants who feel that debate and dissent – whether talking about upcoming Shuttle flights, ISS, or Constellation – are being squelched within the agency. This is not directed at Mr. Cooke, but a restatement of principle for all leadership throughout NASA. An atmosphere where questions, informed dissent or well-intentioned alternative approaches are not welcome will lead to a fractured, distracted, and above all else, unsafe environment. Any onset of that kind of repressive management culture must be avoided. Each upcoming shuttle mission and the continuous operation of the ISS are too important to the crews, the agency, and the future of human space flight. NASA employees must be confident that they can voice concerns through their management chain without fear of recrimination.

Madam Chairwoman, with each day I have more questions – and more doubts – about the reasoning behind the Administration's proposed changes in its human space flight program. Until better evidence is brought forward, I will state now that I am not persuaded to abandon Constellation. I look forward to working with you to seek out those answers. I thank you and yield back the balance of my time.