

NASA's budget and the cost of space exploration



How much does it cost to explore space? That question could be answered by looking at the total [NASA budget](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NASA_Budget) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NASA_Budget), which covers space exploration as well as a number of other, related activities. With questions being asked about what NASA ought to do going forward, the question of cost takes on a greater than usual importance.

NASA's budget can be looked at in two ways, in constant dollars or as a percentage of the overall federal budget. NASA's budget was the highest it has ever been during the Apollo program, reaching 33.514 billion dollars in constant 2007 dollars in 1965 and reaching 5.5 percent of the federal budget in 1966.

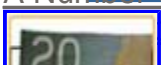
For the current 2009 fiscal year, NASA's budget is 17.2 billion dollars or .55 percent of the overall federal budget. For the 2010 fiscal year, NASA is slated to get 18.7 billion dollars, part of it in stimulus money, or .52 percent of the federal budget.

Looked at one way, 18.7 billion dollars seems absolutely stingy for an agency that conducts research and development in aeronautics and space technology, operates a number of robotic space probes, including the Mars rovers and the Cassini now orbiting Saturn, operates the space shuttle, builds and operates the International Space Station, and does several other things, including educational outreach. Since the years of the Apollo Program, NASA's budget has never exceeded 1 percent of the federal budget. NASA's budget has been between .5 percent and 1 percent of the federal budget since 1975, though it has risen, with some ups and downs, since that year in constant dollars.

NASA now faces a budget quandary. NASA has been charged with an exploration program to take place over the next few decades that, so far, the federal government does not seem to be willing to pay for adequately. The Bush administration, after announcing the exploration program with great fanfare in 2004, shortchanged it to the tune of about five to six billion dollars throughout the rest of its time in office. When the Democrats took over the Congress, they tended to cut or freeze NASA spending even more.

The Obama administration, while providing for a healthy boost in NASA spending for the next fiscal year, has projected severe cuts in the NASA budget in the out years.

[The Augustine Committee \(http://www.examiner.com/x-21670-Houston-Space-News-Examiner-v2009m8d25-The-Augustine-Committee-Presents-Obama-with-Space-Exploration-Options\)](http://www.examiner.com/x-21670-Houston-Space-News-Examiner-v2009m8d25-The-Augustine-Committee-Presents-Obama-with-Space-Exploration-Options), examining alternatives for a



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program of space exploration, concluded that no program of space exploration would be affordable under the Obama budget plan. The Augustine Committee also recommended extending the life of the International Space Station from 2016 to 2020 and for establishing a line item within NASA of technology research and development, both sensible initiatives but both costing more money. Conducting the current program on the current schedule would cost fifty billion dollars extra through 2020. That would suggest an increase in NASA's budget of between four and five billion dollars a year. Even some of the cheaper options, including those that don't even contemplate landing on the Moon or Mars, would cost two to three billion dollars more.

Looked at one way, a twenty three billion dollar a year NASA is not all that expensive. NASA would still cost far less than 1 percent of the overall federal budget. Indeed, with about seven hundred billion dollars of the stimulus bill still unspent, excising even fifty billion dollars would seem to be easy. On the other hand, looked at with the backdrop if trillion plus deficits as far as the eye can see, boosting money for space exploration can be hard sale indeed. Space exploration is still seen by many in Washington as best nice to have, at worse something diverting money from "more important" programs. NASA's budget gets cut not on the merits but because it is easier to cut than other programs with more powerful constituencies.

Some things can be done to mitigate the costs. [Commercializing \(http://www.examiner.com/x-21670-Houston-Space-News-Examiner~y2009m8d26-The-Promise-of-commercial-space\)](http://www.examiner.com/x-21670-Houston-Space-News-Examiner~y2009m8d26-The-Promise-of-commercial-space) certain aspects of the space exploration program and bringing in international partners are possibilities. But ultimately the Obama administration, the Congress, and the American people must answer the question: Do we want to explore space or not?

The answer to that question will have profound effects on history to come, especially if the United States says no and other countries, such as China, say yes.



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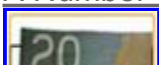


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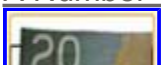
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