

2011

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### Recommended Citation

Ahmed, Amyla (2011) "NASA: Is it the End or Only the Beginning?," *Inquiro, the UAB undergraduate science research journal*: Vol. 2011: No. 5, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/inquiro/vol2011/iss5/3>

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# NASA: Is it the End or Only the Beginning?

Amiya Ahmed

Earlier this year, the end of NASA's 30-year-old Space Shuttle Program saddened many Americans. The return of the Shuttle Atlantis and its crew seemed to mark not only the end of America's leadership in space exploration but also the end of manned American space travel. For many children whose American dream included becoming an astronaut, the future seemed bleak. However, in spite of the shutdown of NASA's iconic program, human spaceflight has not come to an end. The U.S. will soon start using private spaceflight firms to ferry astronauts to and from the International Space System; until then, the U.S. will depend on the Russian Soyuz spacecraft. Nonetheless, this commercialization of the space industry may serve many positive purposes, contrary to the public's reaction. First, similar to the historic space race between the U.S. and the former Soviet Union, competition between private firms may in fact drive the progress of space technology. Additionally, the use of commercial companies for spaceflight enables NASA to pursue greater pursuits, namely deep space exploration.

Deep space exploration appears to be the new frontier of space exploration, and America will remain a leader in international space exploration. On September 14, NASA revealed plans for a massive deep-space rocket, which would allow astronauts to not only return to the moon but to also visit Mars and destinations much further than previously imagined. Based on the space shuttle schematics developed under the Constellation program, which was ended by the Obama Administration on February 1, this new rocket would require a \$10 billion budget through 2017. Although costly, human expeditions to an asteroid by 2025 and to Mars in the 2030s have already been predicted. Additionally, deep space exploration takes place on another front as astronomers discover a multitude of new planets. On September 12, a "Super Earth," 36 light-years away was discovered. This planet, which was discovered along with fifty other new planets, is thought to be the right distance away from its sun to be habitable. This means that that water (and life) could potentially exist on this planet given the correct atmospheric conditions and planetary composition. Another exquisite planet, Kepler-16b, was discovered on September 15th. Nicknamed "Tatooine" after Luke Skywalker's home planet in Star Wars, this planet was found to have two suns, much like the fictional planet.

As NASA continues to search for planets with potential water and possible life with the Kepler Mission, it becomes more plausible with deep-space rocket technology to one day visit such destinations. However, whether or not that occurs anytime soon, a new era of space exploration has undoubtedly begun with deep-space technology.



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