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Trump in Outer Space: the NASA Bill

By Binoy Kampmark
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“You could send Congress to space.”

— Senator Ted Cruz, Mar 21, 2017

The NASA authorisation bill was another Trump huff and puff show, brimming with the usual air of minted if misplaced confidence. “My fellow Americans, this week in the company of astronauts I was honored to sign the NASA Transition Authorization Act right into law.”

The bill was meant to “renew our national commitment to NASA’s mission of exploration and discovery, and we continue a tradition that is as old as mankind. We look to the heavens with wonder and curiosity.” Ever hackneyed, always banal, and fastidiously clichéd – Trump’s touch of the reality show cannot be faulted on that level. The heavens may be gazed at, but what matters in Trumpland are earthbound desires fuelled by conventional concerns for finance and what sells.

Packaging is all in such promotional endeavours, even if it supposedly entails the same gift that has been provided for years. “The bill will make sure that NASA’s most important and effective programs are sustained and orders NASA to continue... transitioning activities to the commercial sector where we have seen great progress.”

Delivered over YouTube, the video featured the Apollo 11 moon landing and that interplanetary conquistador, Neil Armstrong, taking his “one small step” for a US-led mankind. Naturally, celebrations subsequent to gracing the lunar crust were also incorporated.

The Trump bonanza also reflected in his words on the Hubble Space Telescope. “In that tiny patch of sky, the Hubble Deep Field showed thousands of lights. Each brilliant spot represented not a single star but an entire galaxy. The discovery was absolutely incredible.”[1]

The theme of annexation and conquest, ever natural to the Trump instinct, is to push the US juggernaut into a messianic gear, driving exploration (or conquest?) further. The sense here is that Mars is up for grabs, a patch of real estate to be acquired sooner rather than later. Commerce is there to be embraced, and national space agencies such as NASA are the front running agents.

The mission here is less one for humanity as one for US business, though much of this direction will become evident with the role of the National Space Council, which has made another appearance. “So many people and so many companies are so into exactly what NASA stands for. So the commercial and the private sector will get to use these facilities, and I hope they’re going to be paying us a lot of money, because they’re going to make great progress.”

Very terrestrial, is Trump, and the organisation is hardly going to be getting funds to be scientific so much as aspiringly entrepreneurial. For that reason, he sees sense in encouraging NASA’s Commercial Crew program, an agency initiative involving sending astronauts to and from the International Space Station using commercial spacecraft.

In a structural sense, the astronaut fraternity are at odds about the usefulness of a re-established Space Council. Without backing from other White House offices, argues Marcia Smith of SpacePolicyOnline.com, it would merely be “a waste of resources” (Space.com, Dec 29, 2016). Having been tried from 1958 to 1973, and again from 1989 to 1993, disposition to such a body has been fickle at best, seen often as more of a political instrument than a holistically dedicated one.

Much of that sentiment is driven by bureaucratic friction, the sort of fractiousness that instils adversarial dispositions rather than cooperative ones. To get to space in a coordinated fashion is a difficult business, given the range of commercial, civilian and military ingredients that make up the policy.

The report card on that subject drawn up by James Vedda, senior policy analyst at The Aerospace Corporation’s Center for Space Policy and Strategy in Arlington, Virginia, is far from glowing. Mistakes are bound to be repeated “if the administration establishes a space advisory mechanism that is too cumbersome, too far removed from senior decision makers, or poorly staffed.”

Scrapping over the budget pie and available resources tends to encourage that sort of sentiment. In the words of Apollo astronaut Harrison “Jack” Schmitt, such a council, chaired by the Vice

President, “might add clear White House support for the program, but it also would add another layer of bureaucracy on top of the [Office of Management and Budget].”

Buzz Aldrin, the second member of humanity to take steps on the moon, slants it differently, seeing such a body as “absolutely critical in ensuring that the president’s space priorities are clearly articulated, and effectively executed.”

Senator Ted Cruz may have been teasing with his remark to Trump about sending Congress to space. But Trump is exactly the sort of person who would approve. He might even approve keeping them in astral isolation and deaf to the world, whatever the actual scientific merits of NASA’s next grand mission. Things on the ground are ugly, and there are going to get more acrimonious. No agency is going to spared bruising in the era of Trump.