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NASA's 50th Anniversary

Bill Nelson

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NASA's 50th anniversary

by U.S. Senator Bill Nelson

It was Ronald Reagan who, in his 1986 Challenger address to a mourning nation, noted that we are accustomed to wonders in this country. He rightly observed: "It's hard to dazzle us." But America's space program has been doing just that - and, for 50 years now; even in times of loss, even in times of tragedy.

It's hard to believe, but it was 50 years ago that Dwight Eisenhower signed the National Aeronautics and Space Act, creating America's space agency, NASA. It's equally hard to believe, but it was just a few short years after that - that John F. Kennedy presented a bold challenge before a joint session of Congress: Send a man to the moon and return him safely to Earth by the end of the decade.

Skeptics, of course, thought it could not be done. But NASA's Mercury, Gemini and Apollo missions were designed with Kennedy's objective in mind. And, on July 20, 1969, Kennedy's dream became a reality, when two Apollo 11 astronauts left human footprints on the dusty moon. It was, as one of the astronauts insightfully said: a small step for a man, but a giant leap for mankind.

Since then, we've flown the shuttles, built a space station and explored Jupiter and Mars. We've even peered beyond our own solar system, deep into the universe. And now, as America celebrates

Bill Nelson flew as a Payload Specialist aboard the Space Shuttle Columbia (January 12-18, 1986). He was the second sitting member of Congress to fly in space. Nelson served in the U.S. House (1979-1991) and has been in the U.S. Senate since 2001.

50 years of NASA history, we're preparing to chart a new course into the cosmos. I, for one, am more excited than ever about the wonders that await us. There is hope for space settlements and, perhaps, the discovery of life elsewhere in the universe.

As President Kennedy promised all those years ago, science and education have been greatly enriched by new knowledge of our universe and environment; and, life here on Earth has improved by leaps and bounds from new space tools and computers adapted for industry, medicine and the home. America's space effort also has created scores of new companies and hundreds of thousands of new jobs. Simply put: we all reap the harvest of gains from our exploration of outer space. That's why we cannot cede our leadership in space or waiver in our support for NASA.

Finally, though, there is another reason we undertake the risk and invest in space exploration. It is not just to pursue science, or to test technology, or to develop a high-tech workforce, or even to extend human civilization. We do it because it's in our nature. It's been said that there are two fundamental differences between humans and other species. We have souls. And we are curious. It's also been said that the exploration of space is a testament to these differences. Curiosity drives us to explore. Our soul gives meaning to this endeavor.

As we celebrate 50 years of NASA history, let us be a bit overwhelmed. Let us be dazzled, again. And let us revive President Kennedy's commitment to accomplishing an impossible dream.