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**Sent:** Wed, 12 May 2021 21:18:57 +0000  
**To:** Solomon Hasan (hsolomon@iamaw.org)  
**Subject:** FW: In wide-ranging interview, Bill Nelson lays out his vision for NASA

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Hasan, FYSA  
We were on the Dynetics team.

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By Chris Davenport  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/05/11/bill-nelson-nasa-interview/>

### **The new NASA administrator's plans include landing astronauts on the moon by 2024 and lobbying Congress for the money to make it happen**

While in the Senate, Bill Nelson held enormous sway over NASA, helping guide its budget and priorities — from picking who the NASA administrator would be, to overseeing the end of the space shuttle era, to paving the way for what was to follow. As a member of the House, he even flew to space on the shuttle in 1986.

Now, as [NASA administrator himself](#), Nelson will continue to guide and shape an agency he adores — this time from the inside. But to achieve the goals he is beginning to lay out for the agency — landing the [first astronauts on the moon](#) in more than 50 years, launching the James Webb space telescope, continuing [safe and reliable astronaut flights](#) to the space station as well as [planning for its successor](#) — he will need the help and support of Congress and the members he used to call colleagues.

For years, conventional wisdom was that the NASA administrator needed to be an engineer or a scientist, someone who deeply understood orbital dynamics and planetary science.

Nelson, who was sworn in by Vice President Harris last week, is at his core a politician, [like his predecessor, Jim Bridenstine](#), who was a member of Congress before leading the space agency under President Donald Trump.

Bridenstine spent a lot of time on Capitol Hill, about a half-mile from NASA's Washington headquarters. He lobbied members to support the Artemis program to send astronauts to the moon and give the agency the money it needed to pull off the feat.

Nelson, too, will try to use his political acumen and connections to help NASA achieve its goals.

In an interview with The Washington Post on Tuesday, Nelson said he plans to spend much of his time and energy on the Hill and has already started reaching out to the congressional leaders who oversee NASA and its budget.

"I had innumerable conversations with them leading up to the confirmation hearing," he said. But he added, "I'm afraid that the expectations are going to be so high that they expect me to be a Merlin the magician with the Congress and the White House."

His [confirmation hearing last month](#) went about as smoothly and swiftly as they go, with Nelson earning praise and adulation from Republicans and Democrats alike. He was introduced by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Kay Bailey Hutchison, the former Republican Senator from Texas.

In the interview, he said he'll push the agency to land astronauts on the moon by 2024. But he added that "space is hard, and we know that because space is hard, sometimes there are delays. I hope not. But you've got to have a hard dose of reality."

On Sunday, Nelson chided China for allowing a rocket booster to reenter Earth's atmosphere uncontrollably, a potentially dangerous situation, though the rocket stage debris fell [harmlessly into the Indian Ocean](#).

"Spacefaring nations must minimize the risks to people and property on Earth of re-entries of space objects and maximize transparency regarding those operations," he said in a statement. "It is clear that China is failing to meet responsible standards regarding their space debris."

Nelson reiterated the criticism Tuesday and said that rockets "ought to reserve enough fuel so that they've got some kind of controlled reentry. And that's what the Chinese didn't do on this."

NASA on Tuesday confirmed that the Chinese booster came within about 180 miles of the International Space Station, though it emphasized that the two spacecraft were never on a collision course. In a statement to The Post, NASA said the astronauts on board the station "were never in danger" and that the ISS "could have adjusted its orbit up or down if a potential [collision] was a concern."

Still, they were close enough that Jonathan McDowell, an astrophysicist at Harvard University, tweeted that it was "[a tad alarming](#)." The U.S. Space Command, which had been tracking the Chinese booster, declined to comment and referred questions to NASA.

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Either way, Nelson said he is committed to funding another spacecraft to land astronauts on the moon so that the agency is not reliant on a single provider. In awarding the sole contract to SpaceX, NASA officials said they simply did not have enough funding from Congress to award a second contract, as they had planned. In future missions to the moon, however, the agency has said it would award two contracts so that there is competition between bidders that would drive down cost, as well as ensuring there is a backup in case one of the companies stumbles.

But getting that money will be a challenge.

"What I have to do is to try to get the Congress to come up with the funds so that you can have a vigorous competition for all the other flights," he said. NASA had requested more than \$3 billion for this year to fund the lunar lander program but received just \$850 million.

"You've got to have a lot more if you're going to have a vigorous competition," Nelson said. "So I have some work that I have to do."

He said he was pleased to see progress being made on the giant Space Launch System rocket that is intended to launch the next lunar mission. The rocket has been beset by years of setbacks, delays and cost overruns but recently had a successful test of its engines and was shipped to the Kennedy Space Center last month to prepare for its first launch, either later this year or early next. Nelson called the successful test "very, very important."

As for the Gateway, the small space station NASA is planning to put in orbit around the moon, Nelson said he needed to review the program. "Give me some time," he said. "I've only been here a week. But having said that, contracts have already been awarded for the Gateway."

Nelson also said he would push to fund the International Space Station past its current authorization through 2024. He's advocated for the authorization to last until 2030 and that a commercial space station — not one built and managed by the government — should replace it.

"I think that's a natural follow-on," he said, adding he believes a private station could be ready if the ISS is extended to 2030.

"That's another nine years," he said. "Look at the warp speed with which technology is being developed."

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