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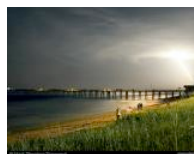
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## Interview with former astronaut, White House committee member Leroy Chiao

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From Sentinel Space Editor Robert Block

Leroy Chiao, a respected former NASA astronaut and engineer, was recently one of the 10 members on the White House committee reviewing NASA's human spaceflight plans. Last week the committee submitted its final report, suggesting that NASA considering scrapping the Ares I rocket that the agency is developing to replace the space shuttle. The report also urged President Barack Obama to consider using commercially built and operated rockets to take astronauts and cargo to low Earth orbit. Chiao is at the Kennedy Space Center for the test flight of Ares I-X prototype rocket. He spoke briefly to Robert Block, the Sentinel Space Editor. Here is an excerpt of that interview.

OS: There is a sense that whatever happens today is going to have a big impact on the direction that the Washington and the administration chooses to go in terms of its space policy. Do you that's necessarily the case?

LC: Well, I don't get the feeling that this test is going to influence the decision on Ares I or Constellation one way or the other. Unless -- the only possible way that there would be any kind of impact, I think, is if there were some kind of big failure with this test. And not that that would technically mean anything bad for the program, but just the perception. If there was a big catastrophic like failure, that could negatively impact the decision-making. But my sense is that it won't.

OS: A lot of people looking at the Augustine Committee report have broken the argument down into it's Ares I vs. Commercial. Do you think that's the proper way to look at the issue? Is that really the issue facing the administration?

LC: Well, you have these different things like heavy lift and space station that were addressed separately and together in the report. It's an oversimplification to say it's Ares I vs. a commercial manned capability to low Earth orbit. Really what we are calling for in the report if you go through is that you see we are saying, "Hey, commercial needs to be given a chance." And in at least several of the options we need to try to stimulate and encourage commercial space to step up and be able to do this and make a viable business out of it. But I don't see. It as black and white, that it's either Ares I or commercial.

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OS: Yes, but the supporters of the program of record are saying that if you get rid of us, what's going to replace Ares I? You saw the reception that Norm Augustine got on Capitol Hill when he appeared before Congress last month. There was a very strong sense that the committee was proposing to do away with Ares for untested commercial space rockets. When you see that argument playing out what's your sense?

LC: Yeah, I think they have misunderstood the report or are oversimplifying it, because if you read the report it is not spelled out that way. As far as the commercial guys not being able to do it, we are talking about, when I say commercial or you say commercial, we mean, including the big guys, like Boeing and Lockheed and ATK and all the others. These are the people who make the spacecraft that America has flown on since the very beginning so they can clearly do it. (Laughs)

OS: You mean to say it's more than just SpaceX?

LC: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

OS: When we first spoke it was when Ares I technical troubles began to emerge and if you remember we were saying at the time not that the technical woes were insurmountable or were showstoppers but that they would have a big negative impact on cost

LC: Yes, sure or maybe extending the schedule out.

OS: Right. And the big problem NASA has right now is a lack of money and time. You seemed to have serious concerns about Constellation back then. Now you have had 90 days or more to really have a close up look at the program while you were on the committee. Has your opinion of the program changed?

LC: Well, the experience, my experience on the committee was fantastic. It was a tremendous educational experience. I learned more about Constellation and Ares than I knew before. I still have concerns. There are technical challenges, programmatic challenges. But I got much more comfortable that this team knows how to deal with the technical challenges and given enough time and money they would be able to engineer out the problems that exist today. Now, having said that, is it the right thing to do? That's up to the decision makers. Of course, I have my own personal opinion, as do the other committee members, but we agreed that we would not make public our personal opinion until after the administration digests the report and makes its decisions.

OS: And when you ask if Ares I is the right thing to do, what do you mean? What is that being factored against? The station? The budget? Other options that may be more cost effective? Is that what you mean?

LC: Well, what we did is we took a snapshot of where we are today. And you can argue several ways how we got here. That fact is we are where we are. And does continuing with the program of record make sense? I think that's an important question and I think that's kinda the crux of the question. And that's really what the administration was asking: should we continue on the path? And what are some options we can take? If not this path then what? And so what made sense five years ago when these decision were made and the Constellation program was formed, I think it's a very valid question. Is it still the right thing to do today? And it's really up to administration to weigh all the things we put in the report and make that decision.

OS: I was talking to Elon Musk the head of SpaceX the other day. You want to visit SpaceX in California, yes?

LC: Yes, we did.

OS: Elon has always been upset that NASA has not turned on the crew option, COTS D, of the Cots program, and his view is that Ares I-X is a Potemkin rocket. He says they spent more money on dressing up a four segment shuttle solid rocket booster than on all of COTS so far. And he thinks that spent differently, the a country might be in a different place. Do you think he' being presumptuous? Or do you think he might be right?

LC: First all, I think NASA has to be commended for doing COTS [support for commercial space companies] period. Putting together serious money and seeding these private companies, startup companies basically, to go forward to see what they can do. And as you see in the report we call for in several of the options stimulating the commercial sector to do human spaceflight to access LEO. So I think NASA actually has supported commercial space and plans to do so more in the future. So for these guys who have received quite a bit of money practically, a startup to say well we should get all the money that NASA is spending in these other areas, well my view is that is a little unfair.

OS: Finally, if the Ares I-X rocket test goes very smoothly today, a lot of Constellation supporters are going to feel very emboldened. It's a variation of the first question I asked you, but I want to ask it from a positive angle. If the flight does go flawlessly, does your opinion change? Do you see it differently? Should other people see it differently?

LC: My opinion won't change because this flight test is an important test in that it will validate models for general rocket design ... enabling tools to better design rockets. If it goes successfully, as I expect it will-- it seems like a pretty straight-forward test -- then yes, I think it will embolden supporters who will say, see we are on the right track, everything is going to go great. And if it doesn't go well the detractors are going to jump in and say see we told you this program is not the right thing to do. So, however it goes, one side of the other is going to jump on the results and use them to their advantage. But in my view, particularly the technical view, this is an incremental test. We the community at large are going to learn something from it and it's the right thing to do to proceed with the test..Frankly it

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would have cost as much money to dismantle this test as to proceed with it. So lets go do this test, proceed with it, get data and refine tolos that can be used not only for Ares I but for other rocket designs as well.

OS: But you think it would be a mistake to extrapolate the results.

LC: Absolutely. I would not take the results of this test of Ares I-X as being good or bad for the program of record.

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