

Editorial

Don't privatize your grandmother

The flawless docking of the Space Shuttle *Atlantis* and the Russian Mir Space Station reminded us all of past days when NASA chalked up one success after another and we could realistically hope that there would be a further leap from the Moon to Mars.

The Apollo program was indeed a giant step forward for all of mankind; nonetheless, it occurred within the geometry of the Cold War and Soviet-American competition in space, dramatized by the *Sputnik* flight. By comparison, the collaborative Russian-U.S. program now under way to integrate their respective space programs symbolizes the reality of present cooperation between the two nations.

Notwithstanding all of the manifold successes of the space program, and the extraordinary benefits it has yielded for the civilian economy—for example, in rapid development of semi-conductors—it is the shocking state of affairs now that neither Russia nor the United States is prepared to invest sufficiently to maintain the independent existence of their national space programs. Thus, Vice President Al Gore's role in promoting cooperation with Moscow is in fact a lifeline for America's space program; tragically, the same is true in Russia.

Russia has a highly trained scientific cadre force, probably better educated than their counterparts in the United States or western Europe; it also has a repository of scientific discoveries that were achieved within the military-scientific complex, but which could not be realized technologically. With the disintegration of the Russian economy under the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund, this capability is being bled away. Clearly, there are economic and scientific benefits, as well as political benefits, for the United States as well as Russia, in cooperation in space.

Yet, at the very same June 30 press conference held to announce the successful docking, NASA administrator Dan Goldin endorsed congressional moves to privatize the Space Shuttle. He also discussed plans to get rid of many of the safety procedures put into place after the *Challenger* disaster. Perhaps some of these procedures are indeed redundant, but the motivation

behind both the privatization and the streamlining of procedures is penny-ante cost-cutting. This approach will not work, but will only serve to dismantle what remains of the space program.

Similar moves are under way to take apart and privatize the U.S. national weather service. The idea is to close down weather offices all over the country, transferring their functions to private companies that would sell their services to the mass media. This information has been given out at no cost to all users since the beginning of the weather service.

On Oct. 1, the Commerce Department will eliminate the agricultural weather service, fire weather services to non-federal agencies for non-wildfire activities, distribution of weather charts to marine radio-facsimile broadcast stations, and the National Weather Service Summary. This last service provides summaries to the public and the media of extreme weather, such as tornadoes and floods; it is one of the major sources of information on weather for newspapers and radio stations.

The elimination of these and other weather services is part of a much broader operation to privatize the functions of NASA, the weather service, and agricultural information services. These privatization schemes have the full support of Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), and are being implemented with the cooperation of Vice President Gore. The logic of this privatization is that taxpayers will save money.

On another, related front, the U.S. Enrichment Corp., which makes nuclear fuel, has also now been privatized, and such power marketing authorities as the Bonneville Power and Tennessee Valley Authority are also slated for the chopping block.

Under current economic conditions, who is kidding whom to suggest that private companies are in a position to pick up the tab for the U.S. government? Only a moment's thought should be needed to recognize that what is being put on the chopping block is this nation's future greatness, as well as its ability to mount a national emergency effort to anticipate weather and other potential disasters.