

How to Win the Second Space Race



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A new book argues that the United States has a key advantage over China in pioneering space travel, as long as it can develop a clear objective and strategy.

by Rainer Zitelmann 

Greg Autry and Peter Navarro, *Red Moon Rising: How America Will Beat China on the Final Frontier* (Nashville, Post Hill Press). 260 pp., \$19.99.

The first space race was between the Soviet Union and the United States. The second, between China and the United States, has already begun. This time around, the stakes are even higher: the competition extends beyond the mere prestige of being the first to reach a destination or proving ideological superiority. It now encompasses tangible economic and military interests. Above all, what sets this race apart from the first one is that this time the private sector will determine the outcome.

These are the key takeaways from Greg Autry and Peter Navarro's recently published book *Red Moon Rising*. Autry was a member of the NASA Agency Review Team for the Trump administration in 2016 and also served as a temporary liaison to the White House at NASA in 2017. Navarro also worked for the Trump administration, including as the director of Trade and Manufacturing Policy.

The book serves as both a wake-up call and a reminder of the importance of space exploration, not only for the economic prosperity of the United States but also for its national security. According to the authors, the moon landing on July 20, 1969, was a remarkable feat, but it would never have been possible without the fierce competition between the USSR and the United States. However, following the United States' victory in the first space race, the authors argue, there was a total absence of clear objectives in the nation's space policy.

These lost years of manned space travel are symbolized by the Space Shuttle, which failed on every level: "NASA expected to fly shuttles every two weeks and told Congress that each mission would cost only \$10 million. Payload costs were to be as low as \$100/lb (\$250/kg) in 1972 dollars." But NASA never came even close. Instead, the authors estimate that each flight cost about \$1.5 billion, and instead of flying every fortnight, the space shuttle never flew more than nine times a year. In the wake of the *Challenger* and *Columbia* disasters, in which a total of fourteen lives were lost (contrary to the book's claim of sixteen), the Space Shuttle program was completely grounded for several years.

"Nearly everyone in the space community has been frustrated by the lack of substantial progress in space since the demise of Apollo. Today, a few bold dreamers are doing something about that. Free markets and entrepreneurship are

America's real space weapons." The authors repeatedly highlight the fact that China has recognized the critical role that space plays in both economic and military domains and provide numerous examples to support their assertion. However, they note: "We will not beat China at socialism by running a centrally planned governmental space race." And add: "Winning the second space race is all about the private sector. We won't beat China in a competition of large governmental programs; commercial space is America's best weapon." China's main weakness remains its lack of creativity and innovation—and the state cannot mandate these qualities. They can only flourish in a capitalist system.

While it is true in principle, China has been closely monitoring Elon Musk's success in the space industry. Space exploration in China is no longer exclusively state-controlled. There are now over 100 private Chinese space companies striving to emulate the success of private space companies in the United States. It remains to be seen whether state intervention will continue to dominate Chinese policy, as has been increasingly evident in recent years, or if private space companies will be given more freedom to operate.

This makes it all the more important—as the authors rightly argue—that the bureaucratic hurdles in the United States that hinder the development of private space exploration be radically dismantled. The red tape that preceded the test flights for Elon Musk's gigantic Starship rocket is a prime example:

When SpaceX submitted its launch application, the FAA received 18,000 public comments on the environmental impact. Respondents worried about everything from bird reproduction to Civil War artifacts. Processing these consumed resources, money, and time. Opponents of progress understand they can "paper" a project to death in America, but regulatory delays and public concerns will not delay China's Starship clone.

Private companies such as SpaceX also secure government contracts in the United States, albeit at a significantly lower cost compared to traditional government programs. After Musk's first three rocket launches failed, he was successful with the fourth launch of the Falcon 1 in 2008 and was subsequently awarded a \$1.6 billion contract with NASA to provide twelve resupply flights to the International Space

Station. “Most of the funds invested into the SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket and Dragon capsule would come from private sources. It would be by far the least expensive and most effective space launch program that NASA had ever participated in.” In fact, it was even better than the authors write: the money from the contract, which was intended to cover the firm’s initial costs, was enough for SpaceX to complete the entire development!

According to Autry and Navarro, space exploration needs clear goals: It is not merely about planting a flag and leaving footprints on the moon and then Mars, as was the case with the first moon landing program, but about establishing a permanent presence on the moon and Mars. And if the United States does not do it, the authors warn, the Chinese certainly will.

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