

Buzz Aldrin: Invest in Nasa to beat the Chinese to Mars

Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the Moon, has issued a stark warning that America must invest now in the space agency Nasa, or surrender leadership of space exploration to Russia and China.

By Tim Shipman in Washington
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Buzz Aldrin: Apollo mission was 'good for morale' Photo: PA

In an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*, Mr Aldrin revealed that he intends to lobby Barack Obama and John McCain, the two US presidential candidates, in an effort to ensure they find sufficient funds for Nasa's goal to establish a permanent base on the Moon and then send a manned mission to Mars.

Nasa celebrates its 50th anniversary this year but faces grave embarrassment. The ill-fated Shuttle is due to make its last flight in 2010 but it will be a further five years before its replacement, the Ares rocket and Orion crew capsule - also intended for trips to the moon - are ready.

In that time American astronauts will have to hitch lifts on Russian Soyuz flights merely to visit the International Space Station.

Mr Aldrin, 78, said: "To me it's abysmal that it has come to this: after 50 years of Nasa, and after putting about \$100 billion into the space station, we can't get our own astronauts to our space station without relying on the Russians." He said his message to the next president is this: "Retain the vision for space exploration. If we turn our backs on the vision again, we're going to have to live in a secondary position in human space flight for the rest of the century."

He added: "These are important issues for consideration by the potential leaders of our country. They're not welcome criticisms for the present heads of NASA."

Earlier this month Rick Gilbreth, the head of the space agency's lunar exploration programme, warned that Chinese astronauts were on schedule to get to the moon by 2017 or 2018, two or three years before America is due to return.



Mr Aldrin said: "All the Chinese have to do is fly around the Moon and back, and they'll appear to have won the return to the Moon with humans. They could put one person on the surface of the Moon for one day and he'd be a national hero." China only put its first astronaut into space in 2003 and its ambitions are more limited than Nasa's, but a Chinese moon landing before America's would be a serious blow to morale in the US space industry.

On June 20, the House of Representatives pledged \$2bn (£1bn) in extra funds to narrow the gap between the last Shuttle flight and the first flight by its replacement, but the money has not been approved by the Senate and is likely to be vetoed by President Bush.

Mr Aldrin is critical of Nasa's failure properly to fund commercial ventures for

spacecraft which could take astronauts to the space station between 2010 and 2015. He said: "If we really wanted that to happen, we sure should have started putting more money into that programme sooner."

It is all a far cry from the national pride that accompanied the Apollo programme, in which Mr Aldrin followed Neil Armstrong on to the surface of the Moon in July, 1969.

Now he wants Nasa to generate the same kind of enthusiasm as it mustered during the 1960s. "It's good for morale," he said. "The biggest benefit of Apollo was the inspiration it gave to a growing generation to get into science and aerospace. Are we inspiring the workforce now to work on the things we need? No!"

Mr Aldrin is also critical of the approach taken by Nasa in commissioning new crew vehicles that will splash down on water, rather than on a runway like the Shuttle. He says that is the best design for a moon vehicle, but will not encourage other ventures into space.

In particular, it will not be suitable for short flights into low orbits, of a kind that could be used for space tourism - potentially a valuable new source of revenue for Nasa. "Americans have been watching for over 25 years spacecraft coming back and landing on a runway," he said. "It is going to be a bitter disappointment to people here."

Meanwhile Russia may adapt and enlarge its own Soyuz spacecraft in order to accommodate tourists, giving them an effective monopoly of travel into low earth orbit.

India is also a keen participant in space, regularly launching satellites and with plans to start testing a prototype reusable launch vehicle later this year that could take off and land like an aeroplane.

Last year Japan became the first country since the Apollo programme to launch an unmanned lunar orbiter. They have a stated goal of setting up a manned moon base by 2030.

Mr Aldrin now acts as an ambassador for space exploration and new developments in space technology through his company Starcraft Boosters. Mr Aldrin says he is joining forces with other space campaigners to give his unvarnished views to the presidential candidates.

Republican John McCain has expressed support for the Constellation programme to return to the Moon but the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, has questioned public interest in Nasa's space plans.

"I'm trying to assemble the best advice to two new candidates who are approaching election," Mr Aldrin said. "There will be one person preparing to take over the government in January to implement things that are of great concern." The space programme was nowhere near the top of the list, he said. "We want to get in there and talk to them because it's so important.

"Globalisation means many other countries are asserting themselves and trying to take over leadership. Please don't ask Americans to let others assume the leadership of human exploration.

"We can do wonderful science on the Moon, and wonderful commercial things. Then we can pack up and move on to Mars."