



## Former astronauts, NASA employees applaud space plan

HOUSTON (AP) — Former astronauts and NASA employees applauded reports that President Bush will soon announce plans to send Americans to Mars and establish a permanent human presence on the moon.

"I think it's wonderful. It's exactly what we ought to be doing," said Christopher Kraft, who retired from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration as director of Johnson Space Center in 1982. Kraft was director of flight operations during the Apollo program.

Three senior Bush administration officials said the president wants to aggressively reinvigorate the space program, which has been demoralized by a series of setbacks, including the space shuttle disaster last February that killed seven astronauts.

Bush won't propose sending Americans to Mars anytime soon; rather, he envisions preparing for the mission more than a decade from now, one official said. In addition to proposing the first trip to the moon since December 1972, the president wants to build a permanent space station there.

Kraft said the moon offers tremendous opportunities in energy and astronomy. Some scientists believe helium-3, a more stable form of ordinary helium found in great quantities on the moon, could be mined for energy. Astronomers also believe the far dark side of the moon would be one of the most superior places for a space observatory.

"I hope it's well-received," Kraft told the Houston Chronicle for a Friday story. "The country needs this sort of thing — that challenges the technology of the country."

Former Apollo astronaut Gene Cernan, a staunch supporter of America's space program since he led NASA's final expedition to the moon, also was pleased to hear the news.

"Obviously my reaction is very positive. I think it's absolutely doable and long overdue," Cernan said.

But Don Nelson, a retired engineer at Johnson Space Center, said he remains concerned about safety, especially because there is no crew escape system.

"The problem is he hasn't done what we need to do to straighten out the problems at NASA with the manned spacecraft program," he said.

Evelyn Husband, widow of Rick Husband, the shuttle commander who died last year in the breakup crash of Columbia, said she was certain he would have supported the move and would have wanted to be involved. Before his Columbia assignment, Rick Husband was working on a project at NASA that explored the prospects of returning to the moon.

"I think he would have thought it was incredibly cool. He always wanted to do something like this," Evelyn Husband said.