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Former NASA Administrator Weighs In on New Space Agency Head



Charles Bolden, at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., smiles as NASA's Mars Curiosity rover begins its descent to the surface of Mars on 5 August 2012. Credit: Brian van der Brug-Pool/Getty Images News/Getty Images

Jim Bridenstine relinquished his duties as a Republican representative from Oklahoma and took the helm as NASA's thirteenth administrator on 23 April. His ascension followed a tough Senate confirmation process that resulted in a razor-thin party-line vote.

Many Democrats have expressed concern that Bridenstine, the first politician to lead the agency, will be too partisan and divisive. Following his swearing-in, however, Bridenstine said that bipartisanship "is important in space." He also said that he is "excited about our science activities that will continue to increase our understanding of Earth and our place in the universe."

What are some of the challenges that the new NASA administrator faces? *Eos* interviewed Charles Bolden, who was NASA administrator from 2009 to 2017 during the Obama administration. The interview, which took place shortly after Bridenstine's 20 April confirmation, has been condensed and lightly edited for flow and grammar.

Eos: What are your thoughts about the new NASA administrator?

Bolden: I'm just glad to see that we finally have an administrator. While he would not

have been my first choice, I think the agency needs political leadership, and I'm just glad that's settled now. I think the agency's good enough to deal with anybody that comes in as an administrator.

Eos: Do you think that he will do a good job?

Bolden: I think he will if he listens to the people and he focuses on getting the mission

"His history is such that he may find some difficulty in working across the aisle."

of the agency done and remains apolitical the way that the NASA administrator has to do.

Eos: Why wouldn't Jim Bridenstine have been your first choice?

Bolden: He would not have been my first choice because he's a politician. And he is the first person, to my knowledge, ever selected from political office to become the NASA administrator.

I don't think it's healthy for the agency to have someone who's a partisan in that position. The position calls for somebody who can carry out the president's agenda to the best of his ability but do it in a nonpartisan way and be able to work across the aisle. And I think his history is such that he may find some difficulty in working across the aisle.

Eos: This was the tightest-ever Senate vote to confirm a NASA administrator. What's the significance of that?

Bolden: It reflects the fact that it is not a consensus selection. So you had all the Democrats opposing, and all the Republicans accepting, and some of the Republicans accepting reluctantly.

Eos: How concerned are you about the agency becoming mixed up in partisan politics?

Bolden: I think anybody has to have some concern, but I'm confident that with the professional abilities of the career civil servants there, along with a significant number of members of Congress who understand what the agency's mission is and really support it strongly, I think it will weather the storm.

Eos: What do you see as Bridenstine's biggest challenges and opportunities as he starts at NASA?

Bolden: Gaining the respect of the workforce. That will be his number one challenge.

NASA has a hugely diverse workforce, not just in race and gender, but in sexual persuasion, in you name it. It's a microcosm of the American populace, and some of its strongest workers and leaders are people who come from communities that he is on the record as not supporting.

Eos: How concerned are you about what some view as the Trump administration's attacks on science and about some of Bridenstine's earlier comments about climate change?

Bolden: What I do is, I look at the budget. People can say a lot of things, but what ends up being the deciding factor is the budget.

And they may be currently looking at ways to go in and modify the budget that was signed and use some budget trickery to not spend funds as directed—every administration tries that. But I think, when I look at the Trump budget, it's a \$20 billion NASA budget, which is incredibly good. It's a lot of money. That's \$2 billion more than I had at any time, and I thought we had some good budgets.

What impressed me was the fact that the Congress ended up putting 400 and some odd million dollars back in the Earth science budget that the Trump administration wanted to take out. I was really concerned about an attack, an all-out attack, on the Earth science budget. I think that comes from the fact that people don't understand what NASA Earth science does. They're not



Jim Bridenstine (left), who on 23 April became the new NASA administrator, at a meeting with the agency's leadership following his swearing-in ceremony. Credit: Randy Showstack

“My advice is simple.... Do your best to be nonpartisan enough to just put everything that you thought before on the back burner and become dedicated to the mission of the agency.”

Russia today, through Roscosmos, we represent the way that you can work with a potential adversary if you focus on a mission or missions.

So I think that's what it means to the nation. It's an incredible example of what this nation can be if it decides that it wants to exert its soft power and its leadership around the world.

Eos: And your hope for Bridenstine with that in mind?

Bolden: I think he sees the critical importance of our international collaborations. I explained to him that he's going to have a difficult time there because that is not what I think his boss—the president—and this administration have that much interest in. So he's going to have to step away from this administration's position, and he's going to have to help the secretary of state explain to people why international engagement is critically important for the United States.

By **Randy Showstack** (@RandyShowstack), Staff Writer

the weather agency, and they don't make any policy, and they don't make rules that people have to follow to help us deal with climate change.

They deliver data. And they do it as well as anybody in the world, as long as they are able to deliver the data. The administration can debate with the Congress and the American people on what the policy should be, but if we take away the ability of NASA to deliver the data, then you have no scientific facts on which to base your decisions.

Eos: What are your overall hopes for the agency?

Bolden: My biggest hope is that we remain a beacon for the spacefaring nations of the world.

I hope that we maintain the leadership role that we have today in building an international collaboration of agencies that are seeking to send humans farther out into our solar system than ever before. And I hope that we continue to maintain a balanced focus on the four primary areas: science, human exploration, aeronautics, and technology development. All of that enables us to support STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] education, sort of one of the unwritten mandates of NASA from the original 1958 space act.

Eos: What's your advice for the new administrator?

Bolden: My advice is simple: Take care of your people, and they will take care of you. Do your best to be nonpartisan enough to just put everything that you thought before on the back burner and become dedicated to the mission of the agency.

Don't try to transform it, because it's been around a long time. It may need some tweaks, but it does not need to be remade. That was the only thing I could tell him.

Eos: When you gave him this advice, did you get a sense that he was listening to you?

Bolden: I think he was. I've talked to him a couple of times, and I think he was.

Eos: What's your advice to the science community in working with Bridenstine?

Bolden: I just ask that they be patient with the administrator and help him understand what it is they do and why it's important. All of us, every single one of us who's come into that job, can be educated and trained. The science community's job is to train us and to make us good administrators so that we help maintain the agency as the great organization that it is.

Eos: What does NASA mean to this country and to the future?

Bolden: NASA, in my estimation, is the most powerful soft-power tool that the government has. We interact with more than 120 countries around the world, big and little, powerful and not. And if you look at our relationship with



Bolden (foreground) and others react as they watch the Orion spacecraft splash down in the Pacific Ocean after an unmanned test flight on 5 December 2014. Credit: Bill Ingalls/NASA/Getty Images News/Getty Images