

October 12, 2001

Daniel S. Goldin  
Administrator  
National Aeronautics and Space Administration  
300 E St. SW  
Washington, DC 20546

Dear Mr. Goldin:

Two hundred years ago, our nation had just laid to rest perhaps its most bitter election, fought, in part, over whether the speech rights of its citizens might be upheld. The victor of that battle, our third President, Thomas Jefferson, had defended the rights of Americans to speak without fear of imprisonment or deportation through the Alien and Sedition Acts. In many ways, speech, and how we use it, has defined ourselves as a nation.

Now comes a new issue regarding our nation's use of speech. This, too, will help define our nation. As you know, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is preparing guidelines for the use of NASA missions and outer space for commercial speech, advertising and marketing purposes. NASA has declined to release its report, titled "Enhanced Strategy for the Development of Space Commerce," but its contours are available in news accounts and a draft report on the NASA Watch website.

In the draft report, NASA's sets forth a lofty vision, to "improve the quality of life on Earth." This high-minded vision is wholly undercut by plans to put commercial advertising in space, to merchandise, and to promote our nation's controversial entertainment industry.

The draft report proposes that NASA adopt a process for "granting and controlling the right of companies to sponsor NASA missions and programs." In other words, we may soon see taxpayer-financed Burger King Space Shuttle missions, or perhaps a Disney Cassini mission to Saturn.

The Associated Press (AP) reports that NASA would, among other things, seek "corporate sponsors that could plaster their emblems and logos alongside NASA's" and allow "merchandising that promotes the so-called NASA brand." For example, AP reported, "NASA might allow McDonald's to put its logo on the space station galley in exchange for McDonald's promoting space exploration to kids."

NASA's greatest asset is the high regard of Americans. The decision to convert NASA into a shell for the entertainment industry could easily erode this support. The entertainment industry is a deeply controversial one. It is the focus of many policy battles over issues related to anti-

trust, and the promotion of violence, alcohol, tobacco, pornography, materialism, boorishness, and a variety of other products and values that many Americans do not approve of. Many Americans, both Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, are alarmed by the values that the entertainment industry is promoting to our children. By partnering with the entertainment industry, NASA will inevitably be caught up in these controversies, to the detriment of its public support.

This is the wrong path for our space program, and for our country. At this moment, our nation finds itself in a war for our most precious values. Among these are freedom of speech and expression. Should not our actions in space be a showcase for these values?

NASA could use space to promote and embody values that America is rightly proud of, such as democracy, or freedom of speech and expression. That would mean, for example, promoting the ability of all to speak, not just those corporations with the money to buy their way onto NASA launches.

What our country does in space is a direct expression of what we really are; and to sell advertising and peddle entertainment products in space is to confirm the most cynical view of ourselves. This is a time to hold our beacon high, not let it trail in the dust of corporate huckstering.

It is not the proper role of NASA or the federal government to promote entertainment products, or to assist corporations in marketing, or help prop up sagging or tarnished corporate images. These are functions properly left to the private sector.

Adopting the values of Madison Avenue, placing advertising in space and hawking the wares of the entertainment corporations do not further NASA's vision of "improv[ing] the quality of life on Earth." In fact, they only cheapen NASA and its mission.

Years after he left the presidency, Thomas Jefferson himself warned of the importance of keeping the corporation in its proper place. "I hope," he wrote, "we shall crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial of strength, and bid defiance to the laws of our country."

We urge you to return to the drawing board, and to think of uses for space that Thomas Jefferson might be proud of, uses that would represent not the worst but the best of our nation.

Sincerely,

Gary Ruskin  
Executive Director