

Throughout the past decade there has been considerable interest in examining ways to commercialize or privatize the Space Shuttle. Numerous studies have been commissioned to examine mechanisms that would place the Shuttle system in private hands. These efforts each have reflected an awareness that, as the Shuttle matures, it is natural to examine the possible transfer of responsibility to commercial operators. The Space Shuttle was intended from the outset to be commercially operated, so the attention paid to the subject is not surprising. The loss of the *Challenger* caused a profound reassessment of the Shuttle program leading to decisions that would leave the leadership of the program within NASA, thereby delaying any decision to move toward privatization.

The Space Shuttle Competitive Sourcing Task Force was commissioned to reexamine the role that NASA and the contractor community play in operating the Space Shuttle. The Shuttle, though it remains a risky and complex system, has reached a stage of relative stability in technological and operational terms. NASA and the contractor community have worked hard to build a robust system that can reliably carry humans to orbit. Procedures have been set in place that maintain the highest degree of performance and reliability feasible and a set of planned improvements has been funded to ensure continued safe operations.

NASA is currently concentrating its attention on future launch systems, vehicles capable of transporting humans to space with less risk and for less money. These systems remain at least a decade away, but the agency is clearly contemplating something beyond Shuttle

that will move closer to the ideal of routine transit to low-Earth orbit (LEO). It is hoped that the private sector will operate these future systems. Accelerating this trend of divesting NASA from the demands of operating the Shuttle flight system is an important goal. Put simply, there is a strong desire to return NASA to its roots as a premier Space Flight Research and Development organization. Realizing these goals drives initiatives to explore ways to increase the role that the private sector plays in operating the Space Shuttle. The job of this Task Force was to conduct an unbiased assessment of various options for achieving this outcome for the Shuttle program.

A desire for cultural change is one of the principal driving forces behind the concept of competitive sourcing. NASA was established as an aerospace R&D organization and the agency has met many milestones associated with establishing American leadership in aeronautics and space. Keeping NASA at the leading edge requires an ongoing review of agency roles and missions to ensure that more routine functions are transferred to the private sector. This classic form of outsourcing ensures that NASA scientists and engineers are free to focus on R&D activities while encouraging the private sector to assume leadership roles in new business sectors.