

# Next private frontier: Space

**Greg Autry**

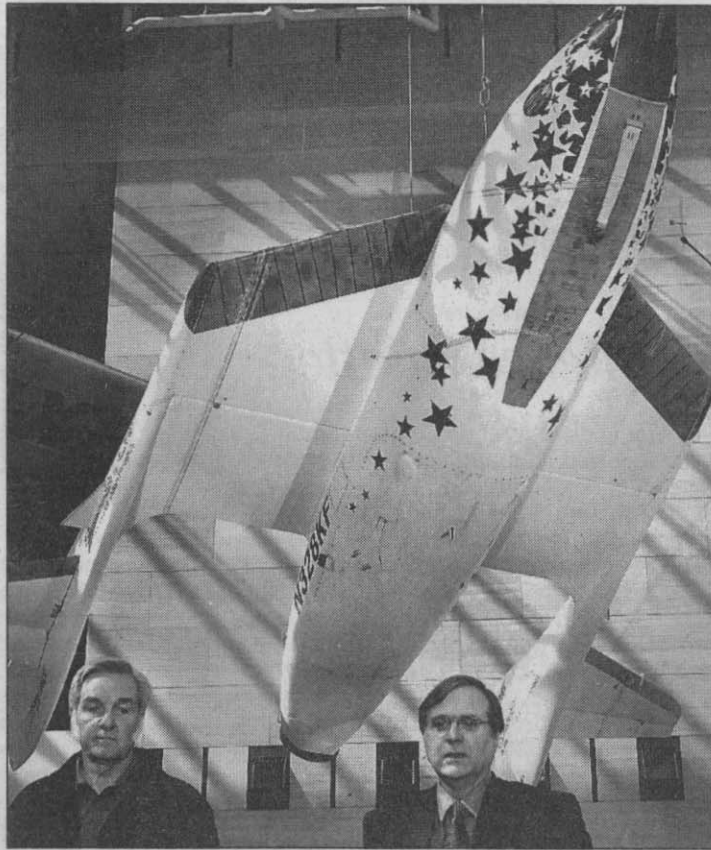
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Last month, India successfully tested an antiballistic-missile system and quietly announced a space program intended to reach the moon in 2020.

When Americans last kicked up lunar dust, India was a country famous for famine. The declaration of an Indian space race mirrors the aspirations of China, another former cradle of human misery, whose recent manned space launches and lunar declaration have also gone little noticed.

Forty-nine years ago, Americans suddenly awoke to competition with the Soviets, thanks to the 1957 launch of Sputnik. The Cold War had in fact started well before the end of World War II; Churchill had warned Americans of the Iron Curtain in 1946. But it took a beeping metal ball to make the peril real. Millions of dollars later, the United States stood triumphant on the moon while U.S. troops stood mired in Vietnam. After both efforts, true, the Soviets were still there. But by the 1990s, they were gone. Neither NASA nor the U.S. Army overcame the Red menace. Boycotting Olympics and fighting proxy wars did no better.

Much as germs doomed H.G. Wells' Martian invaders, our Communist competitors were thwarted by an unseen force: American entrepreneurship and industry. With the quiet weapon of economic liberty, Americans overcame socialist dogma, creating industries and tools that accelerated our economic productivity. While we danced the night away in a disco inferno, talented Americans emerged from their garages with gadgets; computer, software and biotech innovations brought us more gross domestic product and more international respect



Standing in front of SpaceShipOne in the National Air and Space Museum are designer Burt Rutan (left) and founder Paul G. Allen. It is the first privately funded and piloted ship to reach space.

than blowing things up ever had. George Will noted that "the phrase *bourgeois republic* was transformed from an epithet into an aspiration."

These same market freedoms have launched India and China toward the stars. Pundits have recently been trying to warn us that we are somehow at war with these new economic superpowers. (Clyde Prestowitz's *Three Billion New Capitalists* and Thomas L. Freidman's *The World Is Flat* are among the most prominent examples.) We are losing an economic conflict more threatening to our daily lives than Soviet nukes actually were. As twisted as Mutually Assured Destruction was, it kept the Russians at bay while economic forces demonstrated the failure of dictatorial

economies.

India and China, however, face us with our own best weapon — trade — and a motivation we seem unwilling to muster. Former Intel CEO Andy Grove has said that "America is in danger of following Europe down the tubes, and the worst part is that nobody knows it."

Is there nothing now happening in America to counteract that statement? Are there no Wozniaks working late nights to provide absolution for our national lack of attention? The answer takes us back to space. While India and China launch huge, unprofitable programs, America is quietly building a whole new space industry.

In October of 2004, Burt Rutan's Space Ship One — the

first successful private effort to send a manned vehicle into outer space — had its great entree. A number of entrepreneurs have now secured funding to launch viable space businesses. They will very shortly be launching people and satellites, and they are winning government contracts away from the aerospace behemoths.

In September, Benson Space announced Dream Chaser, a four-passenger craft that will be ferrying tourists to space in 30 months. Jim Benson's previous company, SpaceDev, provided the engines for Space Ship One and counts NASA among its clients. Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic is on track for 2009 launches using Space Ship Two. Bigelow Aerospace, founded by motel magnet Robert Bigelow, has launched Genesis I, a test of an inflatable space station. SpaceX, founded by PayPal billionaire Elon Musk, won a \$100 million Air Force contract as well as the \$500 million NASA contract for its new cargo vessel. Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon.com, recently launched a test rocket in Texas, and he plans 10 more this year.

Will this activity ever have the potential of an Apple II computer? That little beige box, remember, once was little more than a hobby toy until the right software — the Visicalc spreadsheet — turned the PC into a real industry. So, while nobody is sure what the nascent home-space-industry's "killer app" might turn out to be, there is hope for the home team in this most unexpected place: space.

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Kevin Ferris' column, "Back Channels," does not appear today.