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Editorial-Opinion

Scope it out

The U.S. should not scrap the Hubble telescope's successor.

Editorial

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THE LAST SHUTTLE has landed. Soon, without space shuttles to perform repairs, the Hubble Space Telescope will break down and plummet into the ocean.

We have long advocated a rethinking of NASA's role. Manned spaceflight is costly even in times of surplus, and for a fraction of the cost it is possible to do a great deal of fascinating science. Now, with the last shuttle retiring, NASA has an opportunity to shift its priorities to do more for less.

This is why it is so disheartening that a House Appropriations subcommittee has moved to kill the James Webb Space Telescope - Hubble's successor.

On the surface, it seems an obvious cut. The Webb telescope, named after a NASA administrator who served in the agency's 1960s heyday, "is billions of dollars over budget and plagued by poor management," the committee noted.

What it failed to remark is that the telescope's hardware is 70 percent complete, much of it has already undergone testing and a special commission established to look into the telescope in 2010 found that the work on technology was "commendable and often excellent." Billions of dollars would not be wasted by continuing the project. They would be wasted by canceling it.

Hubble, too, was plagued by poor management. Yet when it launched, it served as a powerful testimony to the power of our unmanned space program, transmitting breathtaking images and performing fascinating research. It is still possible to complete the Webb telescope and launch it this decade for less than it cost (in current dollars) to launch Hubble. The biggest difference is the Webb telescope's much greater capacity - it is hundreds of times more sensitive than Hubble and can glimpse some of the oldest, most distant objects in the universe.

Yes, the project has been plagued by inefficiencies, but in large part this is because we are asking so much of it. As currently planned, the telescope will monitor everything from dust-shrouded Milky Way objects to the oldest galaxies and will include countless highly sensitive moving parts. Nearly every plan for U.S. astronomy for the next decade is contingent on the Webb telescope, even though it will be launched, at the earliest, in 2014. Had less of NASA's funding been focused on manned spaceflight and more of it devoted to hard science projects like this, all of U.S. astronomy's hopes might not reside in this one telescope. But as it is, the future of U.S. astronomy is seriously threatened by the prospect of its cancellation.

It is always difficult to put a price on the future. But this small cost saving would have a much larger cost in terms of the United States' role in astrophysics. We should remain open to ways to make the telescope better - perhaps asking less of it so we can launch it sooner. But to jettison it now, when so much depends on it and we have nothing to take its place, would be shortsighted - as shortsighted as we will be without it.

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