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The Military Chooses Which Rockets It Wants Built For the Next Decade (arstechnica.com)

Posted by BeauHD on Thursday October 11, 2018 @06:00AM from the hand-selected dept.

The U.S. Air Force on Wednesday awarded funds to three rocket companies to help them complete development of their boosters. The three winners include:

United Launch Services: \$967,000,000 for the development of the Vulcan Centaur launch system.

Northrop Grumman: \$791,601,015 for development of the Omega launch system

Blue Origin: \$500,000,000 for the development of the New Glenn launch system

The obvious company missing from the list is SpaceX, which did not win an award. Aerojet Rocketdyne also failed to win an award since it "does not appear to have a customer for its AR1 rocket engine, which the military initially supported," Ars Technica reports. From the report: These are hugely consequential awards for the rocket companies. Essentially the U.S. Air Force, which launches more complex, heavy payloads than any other entity in the world, believes these boosters will have a significant role to play in those missions during the next decade. And when the military has confidence in your vehicle, commercial satellite contracts are more likely to follow as well. After speaking with a couple of aerospace sources, Ars has a few theories as to why SpaceX didn't win an award: For one, SpaceX has already built and flown a rocket that can reach all of the Air Force's reference orbits -- the Falcon Heavy. Moreover, the Falcon Heavy is already certified for the Air Force and has won contracts. Air Force officials may also feel that, through NASA contracts for commercial cargo and crew, the government already facilitated development of the Falcon Heavy -- which uses three Falcon 9 rocket cores. It also depends upon what SpaceX bid for. The government would have been more inclined to fund development of an advanced upper stage for the Falcon Heavy or vertical integration facilities. But it seems like the military would not have been as interested in the Big Falcon Rocket, which is more booster than it deems necessary at this time. So if SpaceX bid the BFR, that is one possible explanation for no award.

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Too Much Rocket Fuel (Score:4, Interesting)
October 11, 2018 @06:38AM (#57460114)
It's planned to cost a couple \$billion more to finish developing the BFR, although once it's done it's also expected to be cheaper to launch than a Falcon Heavy. It being more powerful seems like a poor excuse when it's also better than 1 new rocket?

Omega uses an upper stage made by Rocketdyne so they're indirectly getting funded. It also uses boosters based on Shuttle tech which our govt. loves to push for pork-barrel reasons. They haven't even started development so it's probably going to be finished last, aka cancelled, especially since the SLS makes it redundant. Anyways, Vulcan, New Glenn, SLS, and BFR should all be ready around the same time, so the 2020/2021 timeframe should be exciting for rocketry (assuming no delays, ha!).

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Crazy is as crazy does (Score:3)

by sibe (173966)
No career military type is going to risk their future on an unstable madman. Yet they currently have one as their commander in chief so there is some irony for you... Seriously though, I doubt Elon Musk's (rather mild) eccentricities had much of anything to do with these contracts. The military already does lots of work with SpaceX. I suspect they are probably trying to ensure there is some competition in the market and SpaceX seems to not need a whole lot of help at this point. I would imagine the Air Force would rather not be limited to a single vendor because SpaceX drove the o

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Not do crazy there. (Score:1)

by Anonymous Coward
Musk as smart enough to hire very capable people for Space X. Contrary to the Elon folklore among his fans, he did not design the rockets and he is not as hands on in the management of Space X as he is for Tesla. He had an idea for a private space flight company, hired great people and said, "Make it so." and became the rain maker for the business: he gets the business and his people do the rest. Gwynne Shotwell [wsj.com] has more to do with Space X' success than Musk does. Just guess who is the Ari Force's go to p

Re: (Score:1)

by Ferretman (224859)

Indeed.

ULA is on life support. (Score:2)

by [Gravis Zero \(934156 \)](#)

Either the ULA is really lucky or they lobbied to ensure specific requirements that SpaceX FH and BFR weren't certified for yet. What this does is give the ULA time to catchup to or copy SpaceX and hope they can somehow compete on price. A decade may seem like a long time but for rocketry it's really not. It's unlikely the ULA will survive once this contract ends without making radical changes and heavy investments. Both are unlikely because the ULA is an agreement between two megalithic defense contrac

o [2 hidden comments](#)

■ **Re: (Score:2)**

by [quenda \(644621 \)](#)

You won't even be bringing your own underwear.
Sounds worse than Ryanair.

o **Re: (Score:2)**

by [CrimsonAvenger \(580665 \)](#)

Either the ULA is really lucky or they lobbied to ensure specific requirements that SpaceX FH and BFR weren't certified for yet.

Or ULA's rocket has more than 1100 contractors spread over 43 States. 43 States means a lot of Senators get a warm fuzzy come reelection time. 1100 contractors means a lot of Congresscritters of both types get that same warm fuzzy come reelection time....

o **Re: (Score:2)**

by [chainsaw1 \(89967 \)](#)

(Disclaimer, I work in DoD)

It will take longer than 10 years because the USAF / NASA cannot depend on a single contractor if multiple viable companies exist. US Govt is required to encourage competition with DoD having the most scrutiny due to having the biggest single chunk of the budget.

ULA had a monopoly prior to SpaceX because there weren't any other viable launch companies (also probably why DoD contractors created ULA as opposed to Boeing, Lockheed, Northrop / Raytheon competing), with Roscosmos "not

o **Re: (Score:1)**

by [samson13 \(1311981 \)](#)

Sounds like SpaceX didn't want the Government support for the BFR. Hans Koenigsmann made some coments recently about it being difficult to not get government money. <https://www.teslarati.com/spac...> [teslarati.com]

o **Make war with Mars (Score:2)**

by [monkeyxpress \(4016725 \)](#)

The problem with Mars is there is nothing for us to go to war over on it. Until that problem is solved, Musk is going to have a hard time convincing taxpayers to part with their money for his hippy peace love space mission. It doesn't even need to be something logical. If the crypto bubble was still in play, he could have launched a USB drive full of bitcoin there, and we would have had BFR by Christmas.

o [3 hidden comments](#)

o **Re: (Score:2)**

by [quenda \(644621 \)](#)

The problem with Mars is there is nothing for us to go to war over on it.

All they need is to blow up a small American town, and find traces of Illudium Pu-36 in the ruins.

o **Re: (Score:1)**

by [maroberts \(15852 \)](#)

Study the history of the term "hashich" and you will understand that militaries are not necessarily against drugs. Or benzedrine. Armies love benzedrine.

o **Options (Score:1)**

by [maroberts \(15852 \)](#)

I presume this is so they are not putting all their eggs into one basket, especially as Musk is (dare I say it) a high risk investment. The original plan was in any event to have at least two competing launch systems.

I am surprised that none of the above seeks to advance booster technology significantly, such as (for example) trying to get a viable booster powered by an aerospike engine.

o **Diversification of supply chain (Score:3)**

by [sjbe \(173966 \)](#)

I presume this is so they are not putting all their eggs into one basket, especially as Musk is (dare I say it) a high risk investment.

The eggs in one basket thing I agree but I think you are hugely overstating the risk Musk as an individual brings to the table. Yeah he isn't the usual mold of CEO (not a bad thing IMO) and he obviously has an appetite for risk greater than most but it's kind of hard to argue that SpaceX isn't a very well run company. The military already does quite a lot of work with SpaceX which is prima facie evidence they aren't bothered much if at all by Musk.

I am surprised that none of the above seeks to advance booster technology significantly, such as (for example) trying to get a viable booster powered by an aerospike engine.

Why should that be surprising? Such advancements are (gen

o **Re: (Score:1)**

by [maroberts \(15852 \)](#)

I'm ashamed to have took so long to get it.

That's presumably why you're posting anonymously

o **In Related News (Score:2)**

by [mentil \(1748130 \)](#)

[In related news](#) [slashgear.com], today's launch of a Soyuz didn't go very well, causing the American and Russian bound for the ISS to make an emergency landing (abort, presumably).

Soyuz launches to the ISS are grounded until they figure out what the problem was. The Dragon 2 capsule can't get ready soon enough, it seems.

o **Blue Origin (Score:3)**

by [sjbe \(173966 \)](#)

All of these companies are old school contractors who have handfuls of ex military generals working for them. Blue Origin is not even remotely an "old school contractor".

o **Two domestic, commercial launch service providers (Score:2)**

by [D.McG. \(3986101 \)](#)

The most important line in the original government post is that they want two Providers, not just two Rockets from one provider. It doesn't matter how many rockets SpaceX has available.

"This award is part of a portfolio of three agreements that leverage commercial launch solutions in order to have **at least two domestic, commercial launch service providers** that meet National Security Space requirements, including the launch of the heaviest and most complex payloads."

<https://dod.defense.gov/News/C...> [defense.gov]

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