

Building a Sustainable Political Consensus for Construction of a Space Elevator

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Abstract

The building of a sustainable political consensus supporting the construction of a space elevator will be as important a determinant of success as achieving the capacity to overcome technical challenges. The appropriate political model for building such a consensus is furnished by large infrastructure projects like the construction of the U. S. transcontinental railway. Sustainable political support might derive from a growing public interest in secure energy supplies, improved intelligence gathering, and enhanced defense capabilities against emerging military and terrorist threats.

1. Introduction

Edward “Pete” Aldridge, chairman of President Bush’s Commission on the Implementation of U. S. Space Exploration Policy, recently remarked that the principal challenge confronting President Bush’s new space exploration policy is neither scientific nor technological but rather political. “I think the biggest stumbling block is ensuring [political] sustainability. The continuation of support for such a program has to survive multiple presidencies, multiple Congresses, and multiple generations,” Aldridge said. “If we can’t do that, we will achieve what we have in the past—spikes and valleys in space budgets subject to the whims of political leaders of the time.” [1]

The same could be said with respect to the task of building a sustainable political consensus for erection of a space elevator. Indeed, one can reasonably anticipate that the arguments already being advanced against the Bush space initiative, like Steven Weinberg’s impassioned public objections [2], will be mounted with even greater force against the seemingly exotic technological quest represented by the proposed construction of a space elevator. Such protestations by prominent scientists will

undoubtedly find political resonance with a public distressed by the appearance of excessive government spending, waste, and incompetence.

Framing the political debate in a way that will lead to a sustainable political consensus will be as important a determinant of success as the capacity to overcome the formidable technical challenges that confront would-be space elevator builders.

2. The Importance of the Frame

To a far greater extent than is commonly appreciated, issue-focused (as opposed to candidate-focused) political debates are won or lost by the choice of the initial political frame. The political frame can be thought of as a fundamental paradigm or organizing principle that allows the public to grasp a complex issue in simplistic terms. For example, in a debate over an environmental issue, the “NO” side might seek to frame the basic issue as “costly government bureaucracy” while the “YES” side might seek to frame it as “greedy corporations indifferent to the public welfare.” Winning or losing the debate will largely depend on which political frame gains credibility with the public rather than on the subtleties and complexities of the underlying issues.

In the case of the proposed construction of a space elevator, framing the issue in a politically advantageous manner will be of paramount importance. While a political framing exercise should never be commenced without the benefit of detailed polling and focus group analysis, the initial public skepticism that greeted the new space exploration policy announced by President Bush suggests that the theme of the excitement and glamour of manned space exploration may not represent the optimal political frame.

An alternative political frame constructed of three interlinked elements—

obtaining new and more secure energy supplies, improving the intelligence-gathering capacity of America and its allies, and acquiring enhanced defense capabilities against emerging military and terrorist threats—may offer a more potent alternative.

3. Second Benefit of the Frame

A second benefit of a well-crafted political frame is that it can leverage support from major institutions (public and private) in two different ways. First, it can help organize and provide basic messaging for their lobbying efforts with respect to the issue under debate. Second, it can provide a consistent and self-reinforcing theme for institutional advertising and public relations campaigns directed at the public at large.

This can help entities that might otherwise appear to be acting out of self-interest (i.e., defense and aerospace contractors) or paralyzed by bureaucratic inertia (certain intelligence agencies) to convey the impression that they are advancing the public welfare in a creative and aggressive manner.

4. Third Benefit of the Frame

A third salutary role played by a compelling political frame is that it can help persuade institutional elites to provide financial support for a particular project in order to be perceived to be in alignment with an emerging popular consensus and positioned to take advantage of strategic opportunities that might result. With respect to the space elevator project, the three-part frame mentioned earlier might help catalyze:

- A base financial commitment on the part of the U. S. Department of Defense and U. S. intelligence agencies in return for payload preferences;
- A carefully constructed budgetary commitment on the part of the private sector (U. S. and non-U. S.) secured with future commercial concessions; and
- A similarly constructed commitment on the part of a coalition of willing foreign governmental participants secured with future commercial concessions and payload preferences.

5. Charismatic Framer Needed?

While much attention has been paid to the importance of a charismatic national leader in building political consensus for major infrastructure projects—Abraham Lincoln’s steadfast support for the construction of a transcontinental railway is a frequently cited example—this may not be a *sine qua non*. Most issue-oriented political battles proceed without clearly identified individual opinion leaders. Indeed, a charismatic individual as the perceived leader of an issue campaign often turns out to be a source of distraction and “noise” that tends to interfere with clear communication of the framing issue.

In place of a single charismatic spokesman, it is often preferable to utilize publicly unknown “everyman” spokespersons who represent appealing political stereotypes (retired astronaut, military veteran, terrorism expert, New York City fireman who survived 9/11, environmental activist advocating alternatives to fossil fuels, etc.). to convey the core messages in an issue campaign.

6. Conclusion

Construction of the first space elevator will be a daunting technological challenge. But the biggest challenge may be political, not technical. As was the case with the building of the U. S. transcontinental railroad, adept political strategy will be an essential element of the formula for success. Critical to the task of building a sustainable political consensus for construction of a space elevator will be identification of a simple and compelling political frame that can help shape public debate in an optimal manner.

References

1. Brian Berger, “Shifts in Political Winds Biggest Challenge to Bush’s Space Vision Team,” www.space.com/news/moon-mars_public (posted 11 February 2004).
2. Steven Weinberg, “The Wrong Stuff,” *The New York Review of Books* (April 8, 2004), p. 12.