

FORUM

Getting Stennis Space Center ready for liftoff



BY SEN. ROGER F. WICKER

Like most Mississippians in 1969, I had no idea that the path to the Moon and to victory in the space race went through Hancock County, Mississippi. But it did.

The Stennis Space Center — then called the Mississippi Test Facility — was the ideal site for testing the Saturn V rocket that sent Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins on their journey. America is entering a new space race today, and Stennis is going to play a vital role again.

Much has changed since the 1960s. Back then, the space race was a Cold War battle between the Soviet Union and the United States. There are more players now, including rivals like China. New technologies made possible by half a century of innovation make the lunar module look like an antique. And private spacefaring companies are blasting off, adding to the possibilities of exploration and enterprise in space.

The economic opportunities of the commercial space sector have taken the spotlight. Now valued at \$400 billion, experts



Courtesy NASA

NASA conducts a 500-second test of an RS-25 engine on the A-1 Test Stand at Stennis Space Center (SLS) on Feb. 28. Stennis is testing RS-25 engines to help power the new Space Launch System vehicle, which will be used to send the first woman and next man to the Moon as part of NASA's Artemis Program. Stennis also will test the SLS core stage prior to the initial Artemis 1 mission, which will involve installing the stage on the B-2 Test Stand and firing its four RS-25 engines simultaneously, just as during an actual launch.

anticipate it to grow to nearly \$3 trillion over the next two decades. That is more than the gross domestic product of the United Kingdom. There were 35 commercial space launch and re-entry operations in 2018 licensed by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), up from just 17 in 2016.

This growth presents challenges. Scientists and

entrepreneurs are creating new and different flight operations, safety systems and propulsion technology every year, making it necessary for today's workforce to master concepts that might not have existed or even been imagined a short time ago. The fact that many of the people who do have these skills are at or near retirement age only increases the

urgency. With the acceleration of commercial space operations and future launches already scheduled, the FAA will need to do more to ensure that its staff is prepared.

Keeping pace with these developments will require ongoing recruitment, education and training. As the nation's premier rocket propulsion test facility and

home of NASA's Engineering and Test Directorate, Stennis is the best-positioned facility in the world to get America's workers ready for liftoff.

To make sure the FAA and Stennis are equipped for this task, I have introduced the Licensing Innovations and Future Technologies in Space (LIFTS) Act. The LIFTS Act would create a facility at Stennis to train and

retrain commercial space licensing professionals. It would provide the hands-on experience necessary to make sure the commercial space sector remains dynamic and safe.

Under the LIFTS Act, Stennis would soon become the focal point for an effort involving NASA, the FAA, the commercial space industry and academia to modernize and update commercial spaceflight licensing training programs. The lessons learned at Stennis would then reverberate to partners around the globe, teaching them about what works and does not work in commercial space licensing.

Stennis Space Center has set the course for rocket engine testing operations since the first space race. During the entire Apollo and Space Shuttle programs, no engine tested at Stennis ever failed a mission. That legacy continues, and NASA uses Stennis to test the RS-25 engines that will put the first woman and the next man on the Moon by 2024.

The path to the Moon will once again go through Hancock County, Mississippi. But something unimaginable when I was young — a thriving private commercial space sector — is ready to take off as well. That will be thanks in large part to the Magnolia State and the hard work of the Mississippians at Stennis Space Center.

Roger Wicker represents Mississippi in the U.S. Senate. He is the chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

COMMENTARY

Social media and the populist moment

BY ROSS DOUTHAT
The New York Times Company

Social media is bad for everything and everybody, for humans and journalists and other living things. But at least it reliably generates interesting juxtapositions from which op-ed columns can be made — including columns about how a fixation on, well, social media, is damaging liberalism's understanding of the world.

The relevant juxtaposition comes from my Twitter feed, which last Friday featured — to great acclaim and many retweets — a speech by Sacha Baron Cohen, the erstwhile fake newsman Borat, condemning “a handful of internet companies” for building the “greatest propaganda machine in history” and driving the rise of authoritarianism, demagoguery and bigotry.

At the same time, Twit-

ter also surfaced a recent study from academics in France, Canada and the United States that examined the relationship between social media echo chambers and support for populism in France, Britain and the United States. The authors found that there was either no relationship or a negative one: Populist voters were somewhat more likely to hang out with people of a similar ethnicity or social class offline, but on the internet they were no more likely than other voters to inhabit an echo chamber. And social media use was a strong predictor of opposition to the campaign of President Donald Trump.

This is not the first study to question social media's supposedly central role in the drama of right-wing populism. Shortly after Trump's election, economists at Brown and Stanford found that he performed more poorly than Mitt Romney and John McCain among Americans who get their news online, while the voters he converted were often the very offline.

This kind of evidence doesn't mean that online conspiracy mongering has no influence on populism. People who rarely use the internet might be more easily deceived by fake headlines when they do wander online. Normal partisans may get kookier under the sustained influence of the memplex. And Cohen is right that small communities of depraved people, from pedophiles to anti-Semites, use online platforms in vicious ways — and internet giants invoke free expression while shirking their responsibility to deny such viciousness a refuge.

But we should be more doubtful of Cohen's larger narrative, which is commonplace among progressives — a narrative that invokes the “sewer” of social media to explain everything from climate change skepticism to anti-immigration sentiment, portrays Russian trolls and YouTube stars as the crucial actors of the populist era, and proposes the regulation of online speech as the main restorative that the liberal order needs.



VIEWPART Getty Images/Stockphoto

Both sides of the political spectrum are struggling with the effects of social media.

Instead, the evidence in the papers cited above hints at a different scenario — in which because educated liberalism is increasingly so very online itself, ensconced in its own self-reinforcing information bubble, liberals end up analyzing populism exclusively through their digital experience even when that analysis is obviously insufficient.

In a recent Boston Review essay, Tufts political scientist Eitan Hersh notes that many American liberals participate in politics through a kind of uber-online “political hobbyism” in which real-world

organizing recedes in favor of constant engagement “from behind screens or with earphones on.”

But if the other side is actually less online than you are, this assumption leads to two mistakes. First, you end up downgrading the obvious real-world forces driving populism's appeal, persuading yourself that an algorithmic tweak or better fact-checking will deal with deep trends — economic stagnation, social crisis — that would exist with or without fake news.

Second, you lose sight of the ways in which your

own information bubble is a potential radicalizing force — including for people observing it from outside, for whom it makes political liberalism seem like an airless world filled with hypereducated ideologues. Indeed, on the evidence of a Democratic primary that seems made for the social media bubble, it's liberalism that's being warped by online feedback loops and radicalization cascades.

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