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## Manhattan Moment: Space shuttle program is a cautionary tale for ambitious infrastructure projects

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With the final landing of the space shuttle Discovery on March 9, a significant chapter in NASA history came to a close.

It's the beginning of the end for the space shuttle program -- the final flights of Endeavour and Atlantis are scheduled for later this year -- and thus a fitting occasion to reflect on an effort that dates back to the Nixon administration.

As President Obama calls for a new era of "doing big things" -- from creating a high-speed rail system to building wind farms -- past projects offer a simple warning: Beware the "unbiased expert."

That was one message of an October 2003 report on the space shuttle Columbia disaster. Investigating the causes of Columbia's tragic disintegration over Texas on Feb. 3, 2003, the Columbia Accident Investigation Board concluded that the causes of the disaster originated in the program's early days: "The increased complexity of a shuttle designed to be all things to all people created inherently greater risks than if more realistic technical goals had been set at the start."

During the investigation, former program manager Robert F. Thompson officially confirmed what many had long suspected: NASA engineers and other interested parties fudged budget and performance numbers to gain congressional support for the multibillion-dollar project.

He admitted, "[Consultants] discovered that the more you flew, the cheaper it got per flight. . . . So they added as many flights as they could. They got up to 40 or 50 flights a year. Hell, anyone reasonable knew you weren't going to fly 50 times a year."

By 1980, the shuttle program had practically doubled its original budget; today, after three decades and almost \$200 billion spent, it has missed almost every budget and performance goal.

Demonstrating that the shuttle program is not unique, European planning and policy professors Bent Flyvbjerg, Nils Bruzelius, and Werner Rothengatter analyze dozens of extravagant public-works projects worldwide in their book "Megaprojects and Risk: An

Anatomy of Ambition." They identify two common themes:

» Endemic cost overruns. The Chunnel (British Channel tunnel) exceeded original cost estimates by 80 percent; Boston's "Big Dig" traffic tunnel upgrade ran 200 percent over budget. Overall, "the difference between actual and estimated investment cost is often 50-100 percent."

» Vast overstatement of projected public use. The authors found that while Britain's Humber Bridge (operating at 25 percent of forecast traffic), Baltimore's Metro construction (40 percent of forecast traffic), and other road projects underperform, public rail projects have an even worse track record. This should raise serious questions about the White House plan to build high-speed rail throughout the country.

The authors blame public-works fiascoes on a toxic mix of self-seeking "experts," politicians, and private-sector interests -- combined with minimum public input. They propose a straightforward solution: Give taxpayers a say.

A "participatory and deliberative approach in including publics and stakeholders," they argue, will result in better-informed and more democratic decisions. Encouragingly, such inclusive practices seem increasingly common around the world, from "citizen juries" and "public advisory councils" to Stanford professor Jim Fishkin's Deliberative Poll methodology, which has been employed to plan public-construction projects in China. Not only can public participation scuttle unnecessary projects; it can also prioritize beneficial ones that lack salesmanship and boosterism.

During World War I, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau famously sniffed that "War is too important to be left to the military." As Obama declares that "within 25 years, our goal is to give 80 percent of Americans access to high speed rail," citizens should understand that such efforts are too important -- and costly -- to be left to engineers, politicians, or even rocket scientists.

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