EARTH CALLING SPACE COWBOY:

George W. Bush, I'm afraid, wants to be a space cowboy. How else can we explain his administration's raid on NASA's science budget to finance heroic manned missions back to the moon, then onward to Mars? Whoopee ti-yi-yo! Git along, little spacecraft! Ride 'em, astronauts!

Lofty, seemingly impossible, dare-to-dream goals are emotionally essential for us to cope with daily life. I mean, who wouldn't love a Dr. Strangelove-type trip to Mars?

There is one slight problem. Trips to the moon and Mars are very expensive. With the federal deficit mushrooming toward the Middle East, NASA's budget is projected to remain nearly flat in the coming years. Even worse, Congress is developing the bad habit of earmarking portions of the agency's budget as pork for down-home projects.

NASA needs money. The Hubble telescope needs fixing. The space station needs to be completed. Shuttle costs have risen dramatically, especially since the ill-fated Columbia burned up during re-entry, forcing a costly reassessment. Thirteen spacecraft performing solar and space physics research need fiscal support. Finally, and from my point of view as an earth scientist, NASA's most important programs, such as Argo, which uses orbiting spacecraft to look down on planet Earth, need support.

It's nice to dream impossible dreams. And I'm all for fantastic voyages that lift the human spirit -- provided they don't require fantastic budgets that wreck other programs. The last time I checked, the most important object in the universe was our lonely blue planet. Changes to global ecosystems from rising populations, developing economies and profligate energy use are moving faster than "Hi ho, Silver!"

A strong science program of satellites strikes me as the most important use of NASA's scarce dollars. Human adaptation to ecosystem changes will be most effective and least expensive if we have the kind of information that only satellites can provide. If I were managing the NASA budget, I would spend whatever it took to keep our planetary house under observation, then use what remains for visionary programs.

I'm not alone in my assessment, to judge by remarks quoted in the April 22 issue of the journal Science. Lennard Fisk, a University of Michigan geophysicist who is chairman of the Space Studies Board at the National Academies and who ran NASA's science program under George Bush the First, states, "There is the potential for serious damage to the future of science at NASA."

Princeton University astronomer John Bahcall sees no alternative to raiding the agency's science budget to resurrect the shuttle, keep funding the space station and follow through on President Bush's commitment to put astronauts back on the moon and then onward toward Mars: "It is only going to get worse ... They will have to dig even more deeply in the science budget; it has only just begun to be mined."

What do George W. Bush's top priorities for NASA sound like? His proposal for courageous human beings living together under hostile conditions while exploring the great frontier sounds like what I heard during the late 1950s from Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, and from that famous masked man who rode a white horse.

What does my top priority for NASA sound like? My proposal for maintaining satellites that would monitor the Earth sounds more like that brutally efficient, everywhere-at-once baby sitter who
reported back to my parents that I spent too much time following the lives of the cowboys on black-and-white television.

When I was young, I wanted nothing more than to be a cowboy. I even tried to launch my toy cowboys into the great blue yonder with bottle rockets. But such play was supposed to take place only after my chores were done.

I wish the same rule would be applied to the man in the White House today, the one who wants to play space cowboy with our country's allowance. I wish his parents would remind him to get his earthly chores done first before squandering critical resources on politically appealing dreams.