

NASA looks to the future with an eye to the past



—by Mark Kaufmann

Some 1,000 years ago, Viking sailors became Europe's first great maritime explorers—setting out for places unknown, not really understanding what they were finding, and often not returning home. It was a halting beginning to what later became flowered when southern European powers sailed and colonized the globe and to what is now as unremarkable as a tanker of oil or a shipment of apples leaving home port for delivery halfway around the world.

As Michael Griffin, the head of NASA, sees it, humanity is setting out on an interplanetary quest not dissimilar to what began with the Vikings. An age of space exploration has begun, but only with the same confused baby steps that brought Leif Eriksson briefly to Vinland and North America (or was it Greenland?).

“Fifty years into it, the amount of progress that the Vikings had made would not have been that noticeable, and that’s where we are in space flight today,” Griffin said in an interview. “I really think that’s the way to look at it.”

But Griffin and NASA have big plans for the future. The concrete proposals are contained in the Vision for Exploration that President Bush announced in 2004, a program to return Americans to the Moon before 2020, and a plan for travel onward to Mars.

It’s an ambitious, almost Star Trek-like vision. And it is moving forward: NASA publicly outlined December 4, 2006, its exploration strategy for the planned lunar mission.

The bigger picture, however, is significantly more grand. As Griffin and others (including renowned British cosmologist Stephen Hawking) describe it, it is all about whether humans will incorporate the solar system “into mankind’s sphere of influence.”

