

The long-planned return of two astronauts from space is now a political issue



On Thursday NASA astronauts Suni Williams and Butch Wilmore are scheduled to don spacesuits to exit the International Space Station. However, despite a plea from President Trump to bring them home as soon as possible, the pair won't be coming home just yet. This will be a routine spacewalk outside the space station.

In the meantime, NASA is struggling to contain the fallout from what appears to be a disingenuous political effort by Trump to shame the space agency and Biden administration for the fact that Williams and Wilmore, nearly eight months after they launched into orbit on Boeing's Starliner spacecraft, are still there.

The brouhaha began on Tuesday evening when SpaceX founder and Trump confidant Elon Musk posted on X that the president had asked SpaceX to bring the two "stranded" astronauts back to

Earth. Musk added that SpaceX would do so, and, “Terrible that the Biden administration left them there so long.”

A few hours later, Trump himself weighed in, saying, “I have just asked Elon Musk and @SpaceX to ‘go get’ the 2 brave astronauts who have been virtually abandoned in space by the Biden Administration. They have been waiting for many months on Space Station. Elon will soon be on his way. Hopefully, all will be safe. Good luck.”

This is off-nominal

Now this is all pretty bonkers for a lot of reasons, but here are two of the biggest ones. First, Williams and Wilmore are not stranded. Their ride home, the Crew-9 Dragon spacecraft, has been docked to the station since September. They can come home at any time. In that sense, SpaceX has already “rescued” the two former Starliner astronauts.

Second, the pair was due to come back in late February—mere weeks from now—before an issue with a Crew Dragon spacecraft delayed the launch of the Crew-10 mission. This pushed the Crew-10 launch until late March, and because NASA wants a few days for a handover in orbit, this moved the return of Crew 9—with Williams and Wilmore on board—to early April.

So, to summarize, any talk about needing to “go and get” Williams and Wilmore in space is folderol. NASA had been planning, literally for months, to bring the crew home in February. Then a problem with a SpaceX vehicle delayed that return until April.

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