Slate: What inspired you to work for NASA?

Ed Mango: The No. 1 thing that inspired me to go work for NASA was watching the Apollo astronauts walk on the moon.

Apollo 11, I was only 8 years old and we were at my parents' house and we all got in front of the TV. I was probably the closest one to this black-and-white console TV staring at everything that was being said and done.

And I watched them probably walk on the moon for a good hour before I fell asleep right there on the floor right in front of the TV.

Slate: What is the goal of NASA's Commercial Crew Program?

Ed Mango: One of the best experiences of watching the Apollo 11 mission was when they planted the American flag on the moon.

And it clearly said that America is capable of great things. And now there's an American flag sitting on the U.S. lab of the ISS that was left there by the last shuttle mission.

I believe the Commercial Crew Program and our vehicles are going to go up to the International Space Station, can go and retrieve that flag and bring it back to the surface of the planet and show that we are still capable of great things.

Slate: What was it like supporting the shuttle program early in your career?
Ed Mango: For a 22-year-old, it was extremely exciting. To think that I was part of a U.S. space program that was going to launch astronauts, whether they be military or not, just launch astronauts, was just amazing to me.

Every day I would wake up excited to go to work, every single day.

Slate: How does it feel to lead one of the next big U.S. efforts in space?

Ed Mango: The feelings about wanting to come to work every day are about the same. The mission is a lot different. Now, it isn't me doing a lot of the work, it's me getting other folks to do the work. Having my team do the details and so I get to strategize more.

And then I often wonder about those folks who decided to put a plan together to go to the moon and put a plan together to launch eventually from Vandenberg, which eventually we did not do.

But the strategy behind those is now kind of the thinking mode that I have to be in.

Slate: What do you hope the Commercial Crew Program learns from the Space Shuttle Program?

Ed Mango: Mostly the experiences of what could work and what cannot work from the shuttle program are now embedded into everything we do in the Commercial Crew Program.
About half of the folks that work on the Commercial Crew Program came from the shuttle program or have experiences with the shuttle program. So, we bring our history, plus some of the hard lessons that they learned about keeping the crew safe and alive and getting them back home. Many of us had to deal with those failures in the shuttle program as engineers, as test conductors and as assistant launch directors. So, we have those scars in order to go make this program even better.

Slate: What did you learn as launch director for Ares 1-X?

Ed Mango: I was extremely excited. Excited for the data that we collected, but far more excited for what the team had accomplished. And it clearly showed that we could develop a new vehicle, test a different vehicle and then move forward with new development for human spaceflight.

Slate: What would you say to skeptics of the Commercial Crew Program?

Ed Mango: I would say there is no great endeavor that does not have skeptics who believe that it cannot be done. I look at what the Wright brothers did, I look at what Neil Armstrong did walking on the moon,
I look at what we did with shuttle flights to do all that science and there were skeptics in each of those programs

at the very beginning that said that would never happen, that would never work.

The Wright brothers would never be able to fly, and yet now we fly airplanes all over the world every day.

Slate: What is your hope for the Commercial Crew Program?

Ed Mango: My hope for Commercial Crew Program is that we have a capability that is designed and developed, being U.S. led,

that would launch from the United States, and bring crew to the International Space Station and to other possible orbits in low Earth orbit and do that as soon as we can.