There's nothing like a spectacular success to bring out the hordes of troglodyte critics in droves. The very second NASA's car-sized rover, Curiosity, was safely set down on Mars last week, the drumbeats of money agony were begun by umpteen tribes of assorted knuckle draggers.

Leave it to the myopic to miss this: NASA's budget is less than 1% of the federal budget. The most expensive "space program" we all pay for in this country is the vacuum between the ears of confused and ignorant people.

We pay for that space, for that vacant and unused real estate, in so many ways, and so often, not the least being in lost opportunities for men and women, as well as for our entire species.

It seems to be human nature: The loudest ranters and critics are the ones without any information or facts -- it being so much easier to have a headful of rock-solid opinions, no matter how uninformed or wrongheaded.

The chief objection from many science-lacking, religion-spooked, knowledge-intimidated, and/or imagination-impaired folks about NASA's small budget is always the same: *It's money we should spend down here on Earth!*

Well, there is no easy or gentle way to say it: *The money IS spent down here on Earth.* NASA does not receive its budget in cash just so they can stuff the bills and coins into a launch vehicle and fire it off into space, never to be seen again.

The money is invested in people and ideas that are very much down to Earth, and in earnest and noble causes: furthering human knowledge, researching the world we live in, increasing our understanding of who and where we are, and how this vast universe works.

It is the act of stretching in useful and positive directions which helps our knowledge, skills, and our awareness to grow. Muscles in the body that do not get use atrophy and weaken; it's the same for that big muscle in our heads, and for human inspiration, too.

Humans have taken the previous 2,000 years perfecting ways to quickly and efficiently kill, cripple, maim, and destroy on massive scales, but we have only recently begun asking the questions that lead us to better understand life and creation -- and where it is we can and want to fit within the universe and all its possible scenarios and ideas.

Still stuck on the money? Here's a fastball: NASA's funds are meager compared with what is spent elsewhere. We spend almost a quarter of the federal budget on so-called defense -- a stand-in expression for the reality of our financing unending parades of war machines to blow people and countries to bits.

It's not about guns versus butter as it is this: Why must it always be 5,000 freighters of armaments and explosives to just one small stick of butter?

It's a question, in the end, of asking why it is some people see infinite havoc and destruction as good investments, not tragic waste. It's more about asking ourselves if we enjoy spending our money to cause devastation, suffering, and death.

If you think this is a good way for Americans to live, here's another newsflash: It sure isn't healthy for any other human on this planet.

(This last point depends on a measure of knowledge and empathy -- that you are aware and still care we are all in this together. In this thing called Life, whatever it is, no one gets out alive. We all need the same things to survive. We are all the same underneath and inside. Everything else is just selective preference and stubborn pride.)

So, while we're busy heaping 23 cents out of every federal budget dollar onto the military bonfires, let's all try to show a little class, and not begrudge NASA the penny out of every dollar we throw them. As it is, we already hacksaw a chunk out of that penny first, and pull that chunk back.

While we're at it, we should take a moment or two and send NASA a thank-you note for pursuing the stuff of dreams and science fiction, turning them into science fact and real life.

Every now and then, for perspective and inspiration, it's good to raise one's gaze from the muck and the mud, up to the horizon, and even higher -- all the way up, to the Moon, planets, and stars.

Astonishing animation demonstrating some of what was involved in landing Curiosity on Mars:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZYnIsLNz3c

NASA's budget - facts: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Budget_of_NASA

NASA's budget - perspective: http://www.richardb.us/nasa.html