

Michael S. Francis

Michael S. Francis—a distinguished alumnus of the University of Colorado and its aerospace engineering sciences department—is widely regarded as one of the nation’s foremost experts in aerospace science.

The stellar scope of his illustrious career began 20 years ago when he became manager for research and development at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), an agency of the United States Department of Defense. Created in response to the perceived Soviet threat after the launch of *Sputnik*, DARPA’s mission is to maintain the technological superiority of the U.S. military and to prevent “technological surprise” from harming national security by sponsoring revolutionary, high-payoff research that bridges the gap between fundamental discoveries and their military use.

Some of Francis’s most significant contributions during the past two decades at DARPA were in the creation of programs and priorities that shepherded the development of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and Unmanned Aircraft Systems of all sizes that are used for a variety of reconnaissance and battlefield support activities. Drones such as these are a critical part of the missions of U.S. soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Francis played an integral role in the development of these complex systems that serve the security needs of the nation and created a roadmap for unmanned system technology development for the 21st century.

Francis’s outstanding contributions have impacted national priorities in other ways as well. Unmanned Aircraft Systems have a key role in measuring Earth system properties relevant to environmental and climate research that can’t be made from ground-based or satellite-based sensors. These vehicles are being used to take measurements of the Earth to improve the prediction lead time of hurricanes, better understand the formation of tornadoes, monitor polar ice melt, and observe the impact of disastrous events. Through his service on the External Advisory Board, Francis draws from his wealth of aerospace science expertise to help guide the Department of Aerospace Engineering Sciences at CU-Boulder toward its rightful place as a national leader in the development of Unmanned Aircraft Systems.

The Board of Regents is pleased to award a University of Colorado’s Honorary Degree in Science to Michael Francis in recognition of his outstanding technology contributions and his public service to American society.