

After the Columbia Tragedy

AIA Viewpoint (web only)

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One question quickly answered following Space Shuttle Columbia's loss was whether the U.S. would continue a robust space program.

Only hours after the spacecraft disintegrated, claiming seven astronauts, NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe, and later President George W. Bush, unflinchingly told the world of this nation's commitment to the space program.

"Our journey into space will go on," Bush said.

The astronauts' families echoed that sentiment.

But innumerable questions remain. The most important: What went wrong? How do we fix it? And when will the next astronauts liftoff?

Other questions – safety, budgets, technology, training, shuttle improvements, a possible replacement, the international space station -- also require answers. Congress, commissions, scholars, journalists and the American public, as well as our international space station partners, are already debating these as well as the space program overall.

NASA has moved quickly and openly to determine what went wrong. The day Columbia came apart, NASA space shuttle program manager Ron Dittmore spoke courageously for his agency, as well as the tens of thousands of aerospace industry engineers, scientists, technicians and support staff without whom there would be no space program.

"My thoughts are on the seven families, children, spouses, extended families," he said. "My thoughts are on what we missed, what I missed, to allow this to happen."

Within aerospace, employers may differ, but in identifying and fixing what went wrong, NASA and industry are one. They are the only group on Earth with the knowledge to accomplish this task.

Though indistinguishable in their dedication, diligence, pride and curiosity in exploring the next frontier, NASA and industry face fundamentally different, but inseparable, missions in the months ahead.

NASA, the instrument through which the administration, Congress and American people express their will, must lead the space program where this reassessment takes it. NASA is fully able.

Industry can and will help. But its primary role is to make the course NASA charts a reality. Industry too is fully able.

Though not first in space (the Soviet Union's Sputnik in 1957) nor in sending a human into space (the Soviet's Yuri Gagarin in 1961), the U.S. is the acknowledged leader in space technology and exploration. Compromising that leadership is not an option.

From the space program come leaps in knowledge plus a national sense of accomplishment, identity and adventure. These transcend borders and national differences.

The Columbia crew included Israel's first astronaut, Col. Ilan Ramon, and a naturalized U.S. citizen from India, Dr. Kalpana Chawla.

Today, two Americans and a Russian orbit Earth in the International Space Station. It was the U.S. space shuttle that carried them there but a Russian Progress 10 spacecraft which resupplied the space station, as scheduled, the day after we lost Columbia.

A Russian Soyuz spacecraft is the "life boat" the space station occupants will use if they must leave their celestial home before the shuttle flies again. With 16 nations participating, the space station is indeed international.

These events bring the nations involved -- and the world as it watches -- closer. Yes, such adventures require magnificent machines. But humanity's journey is the common thread.

Robots have their role in space. But so do humans.

"The cause of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose," President Bush said at the Johnson Space Center memorial service. "It is a desire written in the human heart."

Former CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, one of the most authoritative voices though the space program's first two decades, highlighted the paradox of U.S. space leadership in October 1998, shortly after Sen. John Glenn, at 77, headed into a clear Florida sky to become the oldest space traveler.

Cronkite said he'd long maintained the U.S. would know its space program was successful when the public saw it as routine, a thought he repeated the day of the Columbia tragedy. By Cronkite's measure, the space program has been immensely successful for years.

Unfortunately, it often takes a horrible event to turn the critical national eye to deserving issues simmering below the surface. Human space flight will now receive -- and advance under -- such scrutiny.

The space program has become an inseparable part of America. How we see ourselves. How the world sees us. That is why going forward was never in doubt.

We already have brave souls eager to fly again. We will give them the best machines the world has ever known. And the world will again watch in awe.

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