

Space: Not the Place—2

Gus Grissom

1986

In the last issue of the FE we noted that people should sigh with relief at the explosion of the space shuttle because of its direct relation to the Star Wars program. As General Lew Allen, Air Force Chief of Staff, said in 1979, “Whatever else the shuttle does and whatever purposes it will have, the priority, the emphasis, the driving momentum now has to be those satellite systems which are important to national security.”

The connection between Star Wars and the shuttle was evident to many commentators, with the recognition of the insanity of modern megatechnics not far behind. As Adele Simmons and John Sanbonmatsu wrote in the *New York Times* shortly after the explosion, it “demonstrated with grim finality the delusion of ‘invulnerable’ technology,” and they drew an appropriate conclusion: the Star Wars fantasy “would turn the entire nation into a space shuttle, making the existence of 200 million people [here they overlooked the millions of non-Americans who would be affected] contingent upon ‘flawless’ American technology.” They also noted that while the space shuttle launch sequence required some 10,000 lines of computer programming, “the Star Wars software program would likely run into the tens of millions of lines.”

Other grisly details trickled out after the explosion: the exposure by journalist Karl Grossman of NASA’s plans to subsequently launch a space shuttle containing 46.7 pounds of plutonium-238, the most toxic substance in the universe. If that shuttle had exploded, some 57,000 curies of plutonium radiation would have been released—theoretically enough to give 5 billion people lung or bone cancer. Government agencies continue to stonewall investigators trying to learn about the proposed launch and studies previously done on the possibilities of failure and the results such a failure would bring.

Later came allegations, also suppressed and evaded by the government throughout the Rogers Commission (charged to investigate the crash), that the government and the White House knew of potential dangers to the space shuttle if it were to launch in cold weather, and pushed for launching it anyway to maintain its bureaucratic schedule and even perhaps to set up a televised telephone conversation between Christa McAuliffe and Reagan during the State of the Union address.

As Jonathan A. Bennet wrote in the April 16 Guardian, the Rogers Commission, led by Reagan appointees William Rogers and William Graham, “has accumulated a...record that shows a clear pattern of concealment and scapegoating middle-level bureaucrats...Some of the open sessions have struck the press corps and others in the audience as obviously having been rehearsed.”

And finally come the revelations (in the April 23 and 24 editions of the *New York Times*) that NASA engaged in blatant fraud, waste and mismanagement of billions of dollars while cutting and delaying a half a billion dollars on safety testing, design and development. Nothing but the best for the “right stuff”!

On every level the space shuttle “disaster” and subsequent revelations have exemplified the corruption and insanity of megatechnic empire: warfare as the cutting edge of and for technological development; cynicism and stupidity in decision-making affecting not only space program technicians but the health and lives of millions of people; bureaucratic inertia, deception and out-and-out greed; and lurid technological spectacle as a transmitter for the symbols of imperial power.

Though in the last case, we found it encouraging that people ignored (or quickly forgot) the televised platitudes about American destiny and the space program and were telling space shuttle jokes within hours of the crash. (Example: Why didn't the shuttle crew bathe before the launch? Answer: they knew they'd wash up on the beach.) Despite the disquieting element of indifference to the loss of any human life evinced by people rapidly going from mediatized mourning to humorous trivializing of an event which was at least tragic for those involved (who can forget the look of disbelief and horror on the faces of Christa McAuliffe's family and students?), the pervasive jokes can only be seen as evidence of an erosion of loyalty to the empire as people mock its most hallowed representations.

Lately, of course, NASA hasn't been able to get anything to stay up—in the last year, besides the shuttle, a Delta rocket, two Titan 34-D rockets, and a Nike-Orion "sounding rocket" have all blown up or crashed. If we felt a sense of relief before, how can we feel anything but glee when we read of these failures?

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #323, Summer, 1986

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