

The Challenger Disaster

John Noble Wilford



OVERVIEW

On the morning of January 28, 1986, the worst disaster in United States space history took place. In full view of people on the ground and millions more on television, the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded just after its launch. Among the seven men and women on board was Christa McAuliffe, a teacher from a New Hampshire high school, who was scheduled to teach a lesson via satellite transmission. Excerpts from a piece written the same day by John Noble Wilford, space reporter for the *New York Times*, appear here.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- What sorts of imagery does the author use to make this a very dramatic description?
 - What “bargain with technology” do Americans make?
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PASADENA, Calif., Jan. 28—In almost three decades, American astronauts and those who had watched them soar so often into space had grown used to success.

Indeed, modern society has come to live by the technology of its own creation and, over the years, the space shuttle program seemed to epitomize the very notion of technical imagination and excellence.

Yes, there had been disaster in the United States' space program: Three Apollo 1 astronauts died in a spacecraft fire on the launching pad in January 1967.

The shuttle program itself had setbacks. There were mishaps, delays, interruptions. Launchings were put off. Hardware malfunctioned.

But no Americans had died in flight, and in 24 missions going back to April 1981, the United States space shuttles had made their way to and from orbit without one serious brush with disaster. It almost seemed that only time stood between space technology and its unfulfilled promises of the future.

REALIZATION OF VULNERABILITY

Today the almost casual acceptance of technology exploded in a fireball.

And suddenly, as a result, people are jolted into realizing once again the extreme vulnerabilities that all humans must inevitably subject themselves to when they attempt exploration, or even when they are simply willing to place their fates in the hands of technology.

The recent space flights were beginning to seem so matter-of-fact that the television networks ceased their live coverage of launchings and landings.

Newspaper accounts were often relegated to the inside pages. The shuttles went up, and life went on with hardly a passing glance.

This was the way it was supposed to be. In promoting the shuttle project, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration promised that these reusable vehicles, combining the most advanced technologies of aviation and space flight, would eventually replace the conventional expendable rockets and make space travel more economical and relatively routine.

To underscore the increasingly routine nature of space flight NASA had moved to include non-astronauts on some missions, a senator, a congressman and now a schoolteacher.

Yet one needs no reminder now that those who take off for space in a shuttle are riding atop 2,000 tons of explosive fuel, the power needed to break the bonds of earth gravity and lift them above their world. . . .

"This is a day we have managed to avoid for a quarter of a century," said Senator John Glenn, who was the first American to orbit the earth. "We've talked about it before and speculated about it, and it finally has occurred. We hoped we could push this day back forever."

ASSESSING BARGAIN WITH TECHNOLOGY

At times like these, the nation is shaken into a reappraisal of the bargain modern society makes in relying so much on advanced technologies.

It has known these moments before. Nuclear power plants operate quietly and efficiently for years, generating electricity that runs our technological society, and then, at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, the system collapses and brings attention to the perils in our midst. Chemical factories go along processing the materials that have come to be expected in making lives easier, and then, at Bhopal in India, the system runs amok and brings death and injury instead of the better life. Airplane crashes, oil spills, pesticide contamination and other tragedies add to our feeling of vulnerability.

Still, there is no going back. The world's dependence on technology makes that impossible, and, it seems in the end, there is an enduring optimism that technology's benefits generally outweigh its ill effects and the disastrous moments that seem to make it undesirable.

The shuttles will no doubt fly again. There are three others in the fleet, Columbia, Discovery and Atlantis. But it could be months before space agency engineers can diagnose the cause of the catastrophe, devise and test the necessary corrections and feel confident enough to give the "go" for another countdown. . . .

Whenever shuttles are again prepared for launching, the nation will probably follow the countdown with a hushed dread.

Reporters watching dozens of spaceships lift off in a burst of controlled energy follow the trail of smoke and fire and know that something catastrophic could happen at any second. But with the run of dazzling

successes the dark thoughts have receded in our minds, as they seemed to do for all people. . . .

Astronauts rarely speak of the risks they know they take. It is part of the test-pilot tradition to put "your hide on the line" with a nonchalance belying the knowledge and expertise they bring to the task. This attitude and the safe journeys of so many astronauts over the years made the risks seem somehow unreal.

Seeing the Challenger, with its crew of seven on board, blow up in the sky in the full view of everyone at Cape Canaveral and all the others watching on television will leave an indelible impression in the national memory, like the moment of a Presidential assassination or the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Americans will again put their trust in this bold new technology. Astronauts will fly the shuttles again because it is their calling, and they believe in what they are doing. Others, including journalists, will probably venture into space, too, no doubt approaching the adventure with a new respect, and some dread, with the image of the Challenger fireball in mind forever.

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