

# NASA pushes recovery program despite criticism

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Eighteen months after the Challenger explosion, a troubled NASA is at a crossroads. Struggling still toward recovery from that disaster, the agency is also striving to reassert its leadership of the American space program.

Once the proud embodiment of the nation's civilian space effort, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration today lacks a bold vision of what it wants to achieve and is without a comprehensive national policy to guide it.

Critics and historians say the agency has been weakened by a reduced political commitment, indifference in the White House, underfunding, debates over manned vs. unmanned flight, the priority of military space projects and Pentagon assertion of space leadership, the intrusion of other government agencies into space policy decisions, and lack of vigorous leadership.

The result, says the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, is that the United States could become a second-class power in space, with the Soviet Union assuming unchallenged leadership and the Europeans, Japanese and Chinese moving up fast.

That could have economic, political and strategic implications well into the 21st century, according to a recent policy statement by the AIAA, a respected organization of space scientists, engineers and business people.

The explosion of the space shuttle Challenger Jan. 28, 1986, which killed its seven crew members, ripped away NASA's aura of invincibility. The subsequent investigation spotlighted mismanagement, sloppiness and other flaws within the agency.

NASA has spent much of its time and money since the accident repairing those flaws, making sweeping management changes and correcting faults in the shuttle.

The recovery program is nearing important milestones that will be crucial in determining when shuttles will fly again. Officials recently slipped the target date for the first flight from Feb. 26 to June 2 next year.

The shuttle Discovery, set to make that flight, was powered up electrically to begin the formal checkout for the mission. More detailed flight preparations will begin Sept. 8, with rollout to the launch pad set for March 7 and a static firing of its engines scheduled April 7.

A key shuttle program test is planned for today when a solid fuel rocket motor will be fired at the Morton Thiokol plant in Brigham City, Utah. It will be the first involving the new joint design featuring a capture latch and three O-ring seals, instead of two. The Challenger accident occurred because of a faulty joint design that allowed hot gases and flame to escape.

Construction of a replacement shuttle for Challenger began in August at Rockwell International in Palmdale, Calif., and at the

China Lake Naval Weapons Center, tractor rockets will be used to fire mannequins out of the side of an aircraft in a test of a possible shuttle escape system.

Also, a study team headed by astronaut Sally Ride endorsed development of a moon base as the nation's next manned space exploration goal after the space station, using the technology developed on that project to ultimately send astronauts to Mars.

The team also will recommend vigorous programs to study the Earth from space and to explore the planets with robot spacecraft.

The report will go to NASA administrator James C. Fletcher, who eventually is to formulate a space policy for submission to the White House. But because of budget pressures, Fletcher said recently, "For the near term, we're not going to be able to start any large, expensive programs."

NASA already is planning its next big project, a permanently manned space station, but it appears to be in trouble. Recent projections increased the cost from an original \$8 billion to \$14 billion and forced officials to delay the start of the project from 1992 to 1994 and to split the construction into two phases, the second coming along years later. A panel of the National Research Council estimated earlier this month that the two-stage station could cost as much as \$32.8 billion.

President Reagan two years ago strongly endorsed the space station, but that support could waver because of the costs in this time of huge deficits. The White House, occupied with the Iran-contra affair and other concerns, has said little about space efforts for months, except for the space-based missile defense system known as Star Wars.

Many detractors among space scientists feel the space station is a waste of money, that NASA's selling it as a place for scientific research and space manufacturing is not realistic. They would rather use that money to build unmanned probes like the Voyagers and Pioneers that have so successfully explored other planets and the solar system.

Several expensive space science projects, including the Hubble Space Telescope, a Galileo mission to Jupiter, a Magellan flight to Venus and a Mars Observer have been delayed several years by the Challenger accident. But these are projects whose planning began in the 1970s, and scientists complain NASA is initiating no new major programs and is now spending about 25 percent less on science than it did in the last decade.

The agency's Solar System Exploration Committee last month recommended an accelerated program that includes comet and asteroid flights, but questioned whether NASA would be able to carry out the recommendations.

The U.S. planetary exploration program is in worse shape now than when the program was formed seven years ago, said committee chairman David Morrison.

Morrison noted the Soviets, with their ambitious Mars program, are rapidly asserting themselves as leaders in planetary exploration.

The job of setting space policy rests with a Reagan administration creation called the Senior Interagency Group-Space, or SIG-Space. It is composed of representatives from the departments of State, Treasury, Defense, Justice, Commerce and Transportation and the Office of Management and Budget, the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Office of Science and Technology and NASA.

Critics, like Rep. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., tend to get bogged down in turf battles over conflicting interests of members. NASA complains other agencies often meddle in affairs traditionally governed by the space agency.

Nelson, who heads the space science applications subcommittee and who flew on a shuttle mission, placed a proposal in the 1987 NASA Authorization Act that would have restored the National Aeronautics and Space Council, a policy-making group that worked well in the early days of the space program before it was disbanded by President Richard Nixon in 1972.

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