

THE FOLLY OF "FREEDOM": NASA'S BILLION-DOLLAR BOONDOGGLE

By LANCER

Question: In a time of "restraint," why is the United States government sending hundreds of billions of dollars up in smoke?

Answer: Good question.

The above answer presents the kind of flat affect which typifies most responses to queries regarding the necessity of manned space travel. The lack of a substantial reason for promoting the continuation of such an enormously expensive venture belies the term "responsible government." Last week's highly publicized launch of the space shuttle "Discovery" with Canadian astronaut Roberta Bondar aboard was the latest instalment in this never-ending story of high-tech, high adventure, and low returns. Seeking to alleviate the cost of their prodigality, the U.S. has generously opened its heavenly enterprises to foreign investment; thus adding a Canadian twist to this cosmic case of conspicuous consumption.

Operating under the guise of scientific scholarship, NASA has appropriated \$120 billion for the multinational space station "Freedom," to which Canada is a contributor. Considering the fact that an unmanned space platform could achieve practically the same results for one-tenth the cost, (a fact which NASA guilelessly acknowledges) one cannot help but question the enthusiasm for such an endeavor.

It must be understood that this is a program created and driven --for the most part-- by middle-aged men. A recent survey of NASA personnel found that their average age was 45; placing them in their impressionable youth during the heady days of the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs. Adventure, ambition, and, above all, patriotic pride marked their introduction to the space program. Although the unifying significance of the latter is not to be dismissed, \$120 billion seems like a high price to pay in order to satisfy some vague notion of national pride.

Admittedly, there is something uniquely edifying about the image of human space exploration. It represents the pinnacle of earthly progress; the touch-

stone of technological accomplishment. It represents the best of our world: raw human courage coupled with the sophistication of science. And if something is to be said for judging a society on the basis of its wants as opposed to its needs, then the innate human curiosity which compels humanity to explore space must be the desire to which we owe our reprieve. In light of the present human condition, however, this position becomes less tenable. Considering the myriad of social and environmental concerns facing the planet today, spaceflight represents a colossal misdirection of capital. NASA resembles a spoiled child, demanding expensive toys at a time when his parents are going broke.

Perhaps there is something in the American psyche that does not want to admit the space program is not affordable. Its very existence validates their own inflated conceptions regarding their limitations, both technological and financial. Perhaps it makes them feel young again. But in a nation where the average citizen cannot afford extensive medical treatment, the plea for more space funding has a resoundingly hollow ring to it.

Ultimately, NASA is an agency held captive by a group of incurable, middle-aged romantics.

LANCER is a freelance contributor to the X-PRESS.

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