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The useless Space Shuttle

**It's an obsolete military weapon,
and a botched one at that.**



As a technical consultant kinda guy I suppose I am expected to weigh in on the Shuttle disaster. OK, here goes:

1. The Shuttle has no scientific value whatsoever.
2. The Shuttle's purpose is death and oppression.
3. The Shuttle's design is a triumph of incompetence.
4. GW Bush is far worse then Bill Clinton.

So, now that I've got that off my chest perhaps we can delve into the factual basis for these

assertions. The first two are linked. Twenty years ago I worked for a military contractor. I had a secret clearance. It didn't make me privy to many secrets but it did make me part of the "good ol' boy club".

Good ol' boy club

I was discussing with several of the good ol' boys the nature and feasibility of manned space travel. I mentioned something about the scientific benefits of having men in space.

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The good ol' boys just looked and at each other and smirked and exchanged that "boy is this guy a hayseed" look. I asked what was so ridiculous about scientific exploration. One of them took pity on my naive sensibilities and, using short words and simple sentences, explained the facts of life.

He asked if I had any idea of the engineering nightmare caused by trying to sustain human life on a spacecraft. I said I hadn't thought much about it. "Exactly", was his reply. He pointed out that the incredible weight and complexity needed to sustain life, not to mention the redundant systems, since the government likes to at least pretend human life has value, made manned space travel almost absurd from a cost-benefit perspective.

Twenty years ago he explained to me that automated robots should conduct any scientific experiments. It wasn't very important he noted, since there was such little valid science to be conducted in space anyway. So I tauntingly asked him why we had manned spacecraft if it wasn't for scientific pursuits. Another round of glances among the good ol' boys.

He shook his head and in a patronizing tone explained that the real purpose of the Shuttle (and all other manned space flight) is to conduct war. He explained that for as long as man roamed the planet it was the tribe holding the high ground that would prevail in a war.

If you had the hill you could take the valley. If you had the mountain you could take the hill.

Around WWI we sprung from the ground completely and the same rules applied. If your aircraft had an altitude advantage then it would prevail over the enemy aircraft. In the most guileless and simple manner, he conveyed to me how having space was just the logical extension of having the hill. And once we had warriors in orbit then they would be subject to warriors on the moon and then those would be humiliated by warriors on Mars.

Purpose of manned flights

That is the entire purpose of manned space flight. They are up there preparing to conduct killing on a grand scale. I pointed out that we could use robots in space to conduct war. My friend smiled, sorry Paul, wrong again. See, it is just a given that really good wars, the kind these good ol' boys would dream about, would use scads and scads of nuclear weapons.

Those weapons give off huge electromagnetic pulses and that would interfere with the remote operation of war satellites. No, he smiled, you need the commanders in space, so they can see the cities popping like ants under a magnifying glass. They can spot the ICBMs in orbit that may or may not need to be shot down and can do all the other things that the warrior on the hilltop needs to do.

None of the good ol' boys had the slightest doubt that there would be a nuclear war in our lifetimes. They pointed out that no one ever builds a weapon that they don't use. Their euphemism for a nuclear war was: "When the balloon goes up". It seemed there was a subtle longing for this event--like it would finally give their lives meaning. But I digress.

Have I convinced you that there is very little real science that needs to be conducted in space and what little there is would be far more efficiently conducted on unmanned flights? I hope so. I hope you also see that the shuttle was sold to the public as a scientific expedition (albeit a boondoggle of a scientific expedition) only as a cover for the real purpose, which was to learn how to sustain the lives of the mass killers that will one day be ruling us from a place where no Molotov cocktail will ever touch them.

The good ol' boys laughed and thanked every Johnny-Rocket Star Trek techno-nerd for perpetuating the fantasy that manned space travel was good for something other than death and oppression. These guys knew better and you can bet our military and government knows better too.

So now that they have this great cover con-job going to help them perfect the latest vehicle of oppression I can guarantee you they won't just kill the program like they should. We can't get behind schedule on the pert-chart to Armageddon can we?

Incompetent design

So now let's look at my third statement--that the Shuttle design was incompetent. The primary causation of the hodgepodge of blatant incompetence that became the Shuttle is the same hodgepodge of incompetence that caused the disaster known as the Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

Both projects were plagued with the same issues: No firm mission and way too many chiefs adding way too much stuff.

The Bradley started life as a simple troop carrier. Kind of like a Chevy Suburban. Then the managers descended. Shades of Dilbert.

Well, we can't just have our guys hanging their asses out in the air so let's add a bunch of armor. Well now that we've got armor how about a 20mm cannon? And now we need more ammo. And lets have it be able to float across rivers.

1 lb = 10lbs

Both cars and airplanes have a simple design rule-of-thumb: Every pound you add causes ten pounds to be added total, when you take into account the added structure and bigger tires and more fuel etc etc. I have to believe that the Shuttle has an even more extreme rule-of-thumb. So even though it was a given that the Shuttle was a moronic endeavor since it was to be manned, project management's blatant stupidity made a bad concept worse.

Let's have a big cargo bay! And a space arm! And lets have the astronauts do space walks! Pretty soon the big stupid vehicle became almost awe-inspiring in it's moronic implementation. Just look at it, people. Two solid rockets strapped to the side of a giant external fuel tank, all of which falls off after the thing launches. Delicate exotic stuff everywhere and beyond everything else, the thing is gigantic--it has to be.

The more stupid systems and extra crap you bring along insures that the thing will be so complex it will be un-maintainable. And guess what? They are un-maintainable. That's why the f__king things blow up every few years. Duh.

The first shuttle disaster

I remember when the first one blew up; they did an investigation and found that the low-level engineers gave a mean time between loss-of-life failure at 200 hours. By the time this dreadful (but mathematically invariable due to the complexity of the spacecraft) figure worked its way up the ranks of management it magically turned into 2000 hours.

I bet we're a lot closer to 200 hours between loss of life accidents then the management number. When the first one crashed the morons that seem to infect project management everywhere in the world suggested putting an escape hatch in the shuttle, or a pod, as they are now calling for.

Those pesky low-level engineers had only more bad news--the complexity of adding another closure to the craft, much less an entire escape pod, would only make the reliability of the craft even worse.

A simple rule of MIL-HDBK-217F reliability analysis folks: You can't add stuff and make anything more reliable. When it gets complex enough it will blow up. And it did. No surprise. Of course, behind the usual corporate indo-mil project-management incompetence was the lingering ghosts of the real reason the shuttle was launched in the first place-- the military. They got their two cents in on design issues too because, after all, that's all the shuttle was about, really. So there was even more complexity added but we don't know too much about this stuff since it all remains classified.

Clinton and Bush

Good. I hope this little design tutorial has taught you how not to design complex electro-mechanical systems that are expected to sustain life in insanely hostile environments. Now the last little assertion about GW being worse then Billy Clinton was just a gratuitous jab at all you libertarians that think that Big-Oil Republicans are anything but our worst enemy and darkest nightmare. Bush is already vowing to give NASA 500 million dollars more to piss away on perfecting the ultimate tools of oppression.

So it seems the conservative's reaction to the failure of bad technology is the exact same reaction as the liberal's reaction to the failure of bad public education. Just throw money at it. It was Reverend Ike who used to say: "Throw yo' money to the wall people, that what sticks is for da Lord and that what falls is for da church."

At least with Ike you got some entertainment for your money. It is now very clear there is a big difference between Bill Clinton and G W Bush. Government got smaller under Clinton. Both of them were pretty bad for civil rights but if Clinton gave Nadine Strossen a bellyache, Bush must be giving her a cardiac arrest.

As to Reno vs. Ashcroft, well, cops are cops and it is starting to make sense to me why those sixties losers called the cops pigs. They generally are. I'll tell you one thing that should terrify you: When Bill Clinton talked about God and religion you knew he was bullshitting you just like with everything else he said. When Bush talks about God and religion he really thinks some supreme being is directing his actions from above and it is all in His name that America is supposed to be turned into a Police State.

NASA and NATO

NASA is just like NATO. They are the viral trash-DNA left over from when our leaders dreamed up and implemented the "cold war", the last mass con-job to be perpetrated on a trusting public. Both organizations are just as useless and both should be abolished. The budget of NASA is 15 billion dollars. Shut it down and GW could hand every American man, woman and child a 50-dollar bill. If he did that, even I might vote for him.