

Remembering the Astronauts

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

It appears that the genesis of the Columbia disaster began on lift-off when a piece of the booster rocket broke off and hit the left wing of the shuttle. NASA officials discussed what had happened but did not think that it was serious or life threatening. Nor did it hamper the flight into space and the two weeks of scientific experiments. In fact, the shuttle and its crew performed flawlessly during those two weeks. But it now seems that the damage to the left wing was much greater than originally thought and caused enough of the protective tiles to strip off so that Columbia began to disintegrate under the intense heat on entering the earth's atmosphere.

The loss of the Columbia crew has hit us all very hard. In our mind's eye we see them in their orange spacesuits smiling and waving as they were about to embark on their mission. The astronauts represented the best human beings that our civilization can produce in terms of courage, daring, scientific curiosity, and a sense of service to mankind. And the mission represented the best of American endeavor in the quest to know more about the universe we live in and how to make better use of its resources.

The crew included Americans of the Right Stuff, black and white, male and female—David Brown, 46, naval aviator and surgeon; Rick D. Husband, 45 space pilot; Laurel Clark, 41, zoologist; Michael P. Anderson, 43, Air Force veteran and physicist; William C. McCool, 41, naval test pilot; an Indian woman, Kalpana Chawla, 41, aeronautical engineer; and an Israeli Air Force Colonel, Ilan Ramon, 48, who had fought in two of Israel's wars and was one of the pilots who took part in the daring attack on Iraq's nuclear facility in 1981. Each one of these remarkable human beings was irreplaceable and will be sorely missed by their families and their nations.

The Islamic fanatics in the Arab world no doubt view this disaster as the will of Allah, just as they viewed the killing of 3,000 human beings in New York on September 11, 2001. To them Allah is a destroyer. And that is why the people in the Moslem world cannot produce anything of benefit to mankind. Their great achievements are child suicide bombers, terrorists, dictators, political corruption, hatred of Jews, poverty, backwardness, and pure, unadulterated evil. The only things worth seeing in the Moslem world are the ruins of past civilizations.

There is indeed a clash of civilizations taking place and that the superior West will win, but at a price. Our rational, benign civilization has been under attack since the end of World War I, when the Bolsheviks conquered Russia and waged their fierce unrelenting war against capitalism for 75 years. At the end of that sometimes hot and sometimes cold war we assumed that we were now in a position to enjoy the fruits of economic and political freedom without fear of being blown out of the sky by a shoe-bomber.

But the reality of the 21st century is that the war against us goes on. The crazies are still very much with us as evidenced by the latest “peace” demonstrations. Saddam Hussein still lords it over a people suffering ten years of sanctions because he defies giving up his weapons; Mugabe rules Zimbabwe, starves his opponents and kills white farmers; the commie dictator of North Korea builds his bomb while his people eat grass and tree bark.

But the spaceship disaster reminds us that there are still risks in our endeavors to make travel and experimentation in space safe and successful. We have yet to mitigate physical danger as we drive our cars, fly in airplanes, slip on ice, drown in oceans.

The 20th century started auspiciously. Science had made tremendous advances. New inventions were improving life immeasurably. Then, in 1912, the Titanic, the world’s largest and most luxurious ship, hit an iceberg in the middle of the Atlantic and sank with a great loss of life. And with her sank the promise of a new age of unlimited peace and prosperity. It was an omen that nature is still stronger than man and his technology.

And so, it takes courageous, self-less men and women to fly into space, probe the depths of the oceans, and find ways to give nature a run for its money. We admire them for who they are and what they represent in human aspiration. Without them there would never have been a Western Civilization in which ordinary human beings today live far better than the kings and princes of olden times.

It is easy to forget what it took to get us to where we are now: cruising the Caribbean on luxury liners, driving cars with stereos and power this-and-that, writing articles on word processors, flying to vacations in Hawaii, sending emails to Australia, eating gourmet frozen dinners, enjoying Chilean grapes in winter.

And that is why we must not forget the astronauts who lost their lives trying to make our lives better. They join the heroes of the past who sacrificed their lives to advance our great humane civilization.