

This Bus Goes Nowhere

by [Vin Suprynowicz](#)

On Saturday, Feb. 1, most Americans were surprised and saddened as we awakened to the news that six federal government employees (five military officers and a civilian engineer) and a brave Israeli Air Force colonel had burned up and died as the creaky 21-year-old Space Bus Columbia overheated and broke up on re-entry over Texas after a 16-day pointless mission in near earth orbit.

By all indications these were seven smart, fine, brave and decent folk. All but Dr. Kalpana Chawla were where the military told them to be, and thus deserve our respect and gratitude as do any servicemen who die in the line of duty. They leave behind spouses and children and dogs; a day of sadness and respect was doubtless appropriate.

On the other hand, were flags dropped to half staff all around the nation the last time we lost a handful of guys in helicopter training accidents? These were seven adults who knew or should have known the risks, and one confidently assumes they all had liberal tax-paid survivor benefits. I'm sorry they're gone, but there is really no justification here for suspending all our faculties of reason and analysis as we rush to show off our patriotic crocodile tears.

I particularly refer to the thoroughly predictable call that, "We certainly can't suspend or cut back our space program – now – of all times. Why, that would be an appalling admission of a national weakness of the heart and of the spirit in the face of adversity."

No it wouldn't. After the 1937 Hindenburg disaster in Lakehurst, N.J. – from which most of the passengers walked away unscathed, by the way (something you certainly can't say about most of our modern-day plane crashes) – did the people rise en masse to declare, "We must now redouble our efforts to expand and continue commercial dirigible passenger service – any other course would be a pathetic admission of defeat for the human race in the face of a minor technical setback"?

Um ... no.

Yes, I realize the Hindenburg was German, not American. But so what? The point is that commercial dirigible passenger travel ended essentially overnight, and the progress of modern science and technology continued without missing a beat. They were slow and highly vulnerable to bad weather even after you got past that little hydrogen problem, as our Navy found out with the helium-safe Macon.

A few brave souls occasionally suggest bringing back rigid-frame airships for their cargo-lifting capacity, and I wish them well. But the technological progress of the modern world proceeded just fine without commercial Zeppelin travel, just as it will get along just fine – in fact, better, as vast confiscated resources now wasted on government Space Pork are freed to flow into more promising avenues – after our fleet of lumbering space buses, 90-ton, billion-dollar hollow aluminum "all-purpose" meteorites that do nothing particularly well but cost a whole lot doing it, are finally mothballed.

As is now likely to happen sooner than later, no matter how NASA tries to wave the flags, enlist the schoolchildren in writing letters about their "hopes and dreams," and other such shopworn piffle.

Why does the space shuttle carry seven people? Because it was designed with seven seats. The fact that what little these lumbering space buses accomplish could easily be executed by a crew of two or three is clearly demonstrated by the way their "crew" manifests have progressively become toys of patronage and public relations.

You know that not much of importance is going on when they can offer free seats to schoolteachers and foreign dignitaries and septuagenarian senators, as they've been doing for years now. The American public has for years unquestioningly accepted without question the baldfaced assertion of "valuable science experiments" being done up there, but where's the real independent cost accounting? One widely publicized shuttle experiment involved determining whether spiders would build symmetrical webs in zero gravity – I seem to recall some schoolchild dreamed that one up to win a contest.

And anything demanding careful measurement in zero-gravity conditions could – certainly – be done better without seven human chimps bouncing

around, bumping into the bulkheads as they try to figure out how to use the porta-potty.

Yes, shuttles have lofted numerous scientific instruments into space, "but only because policy makers mandated that the equipment be configured so they could fly only on the shuttle, and not on Apollo-era booster rockets," reporter Sharon Begley revealed in the Feb. 3 *Wall Street Journal*.

"From the first flight of the Columbia itself in 1981, the scientific community has viewed the shuttle as a black hole for space dollars," Begley writes, "sucking them up and sending back almost nothing in return."

The "science" on the space shuttle has been made up, quite simply, to create a "scientific" rationale for this billion-dollar bus route to nowhere. From studies of protein crystallization to the behavior of fire in zero gravity, "There is no experiment that has been done on the space shuttle that has made a significant difference to any field of science," according to physicist Robert Park of the American Physical Society in College Park, Maryland.

NASA has to publish the results of such twaddle itself because "They're not cutting edge science, by and large," agrees Alex Roland, professor of the history of technology at Duke University. "There's a lot of make-work going on up there," Professor Roland told Ms. Begley of the *Journal*, as a result of which the results of the shuttle "experiments" are hardly ever published in "refereed scientific journals."

FAILS CRUCIAL SPECIFICATIONS

Why do we need the space shuttle? Why, because valuable science is being done up there, we're told, measuring the astronauts' urine production and reaction to weightlessness.

And why is that valuable?

Because it facilitates future shuttle missions.

Ah, so a multi-billion dollar program is proven valuable because it facilitates doing more of the same thing, later. Have I got that right?

Well, wait a minute, you're forgetting that then there's the "International Space Station" – surely the most ludicrously inflated title ever bestowed on an over-budget orbiting tin can full of sweat stink that would get you convicted of child abuse if you were to lock any child inside it on a typical schoolyard playground for as little as an hour.

Yes, our submariners once put up with worse. But there's no imperial Japanese space fleet up there for us to stalk and sink, in case you haven't noticed.

The shuttle is needed to supply and relieve the "International Space Station," you see. And the reason we need an "International Space Station" is ... well, to give the space shuttle something to do.

The notion that this was all preparing us for a manned mission to Mars was abandoned decades ago. The main priority of any government bureaucracy is – always – to keep itself going at any cost. If they've learned all they can possibly learn at this point, and all the objective analyses show the safest and most cost-effective option is to simply mothball these beasts, do you think NASA's administrators are actually going to – tell – us that?

The space shuttles were originally designed to fly every week or two, but they actually need a complete (and enormously expensive) rebuild after each mission, meaning they can fly only once a year. Which explains why the ancient, groaning Columbia, which was supposed to fly 100 missions in a couple years and then retire, was being launched (with many fingers crossed) on only her 28th mission last month, after 21 years in service!

There aren't many 21-year-old vehicles I'd even drive across the country, let alone subject to temperatures high enough to melt steel at Mach 18 or 25.

The shuttle was supposed to be able to "pay its way" with commercial payloads, but has never even come close – NASA no longer even pretends to be trying. The shuttle was supposed to carry spacemen to repair satellites in high earth orbit, but it can't. It's too heavy and it can't go high enough. It missed many of its original mission specifications, at which point it should and would have been canceled before it ever got off the drawing boards, except that NASA had no other project big enough to keep everyone in work. So the shuttle can only repair faultily

designed telescopes (do you suppose government could have had anything to do with that?) set in low earth orbit to give it something to do, or else – launch – satellites from low earth orbit into high earth orbit, which is ludicrous, since that job can be done at a tiny fraction of the cost (and far more safely) with unmanned boosters.

In fact, the Space Shuttle is little more than an enormous make-work jobs program for a large segment of the "Aerospace Industry," whose potentially productive members should have been cut loose and encouraged to go apply their talents to profitable, free-market endeavors 30 years ago, after they got us to the moon ... which – itself – was little more than a Cold War political publicity stunt designed to potlatch the Soviet Union into bankruptcy – a goal we accomplished 13 years ago, in case no one in Houston or Cape Canaveral has noticed.

What's that? The space program has given us charcoal filters, miniaturized computers, and the powdered orange-flavored fruit drink "Tang"? Right you are. At development costs in the billions of dollars, and possibly a few months faster than they would have been developed by private entrepreneurs trying to sell us better wristwatches, TVs, and home computers ... though even that is impossible to prove, given the way government intervention always messes up asset allocations.

A GOVERNMENT MONOPOLY

Listen to these desperate charlatans crow that "We can't abandon the space program – now – of all times. In the face of adversity," these table pounders demand, "are we ready to turn tail and give up part of what makes American unique and great?"

How does this differ, really, from the statement of some headstrong barbarian Irish chieftain that "I alone in all the land am great enough to drive one thousand slaves, one thousand virgins, and one thousand head of prime cattle off the cliffs in sacrifice each year at the celebration of Bron Trogain. Why should I stop? This alone proves that Ailil of Cruachan is the greatest king in all the land, does it not? Does anyone else have such wealth to throw away?! Am I not great and fearsome?"

As we speak, a dozen cashiered NASA whistle-blowers are desperately trying to get the media's attention to tell their "I told them this would happen" whistle-blower stories, and the NASA chieftains are just as busy shredding all those "I can't believe you're going to fly this thing again

without the redesign and refit you promised us" memos, while closing ranks and doubtless blackmailing (remember those death benefits) even the weeping widows to come forward and tell America, "My husband will have died for nothing if you suspend this program now ... Jim wouldn't have wanted that."

Please leave the widows in peace, guys. Don't you think they've already sacrificed enough?

I've been accused in the past of lacking vision, of being "against space exploration."

But that's not true. These seven victims of a superannuated government boondoggle weren't "pushing back the frontiers of space," as we were repeatedly told over the weekend of Feb. 1. (Don't get me started on the television press corps, pretentiously intoning that "NASA now gets to work on getting the space shuttles back where they belong – into space." There's objective analysis for you. To which channel do I flip to hear someone announce that "NASA now gets to work on getting these space shuttles where they belong – into a museum"?)

In fact, these seven victims were riding an enormously expensive government commuter bus to nowhere.

If some private entrepreneur, having bought NASA's left-over space junk at a bankruptcy auction, wants to sell shares and launch a venture to mine the asteroids for precious metals, or endeavor to demonstrate the colonization of Mars can be safe and cost-effective (there actually is such a fellow – Dr. Robert Zubrin), let him or her proceed with my blessing.

(Government didn't develop the airplane, or the locomotive, or the steamship. Why should it have a monopoly on space? If the answer is that "government is now bigger than any private corporation," isn't that just another way of stating the same problem?)

But there is nothing unpatriotic about asking why we continue to shoehorn seven sacrificial victims at a time into these big orbiting aluminum buses, just to prove ... what? That we're the only ones who can afford to waste billions of dollars shoehorning seven sacrificial victims at a time into big orbiting aluminum buses?

Watch four government workmen change the lightbulb in a stoplight.

Watch your state government waste millions and anger and frustrate hundreds of thousands snarling up a totally unnecessary "motor vehicle registration" scam. Government messes up everything it touches ... after convincing us that exceeding the budget by a factor of 10, and producing results astonishingly below initial promises, is "close enough for government work."

The only reason it's not now "time to end the government space program" is that it was time to end the government space program, 30 years ago.

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