



APOLLO YEAR 25

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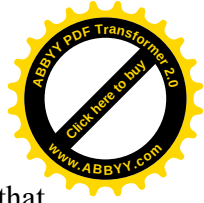
Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry became the first science fiction writer in space. His ashes were carried into orbit in the personal kit of space shuttle commander James Wetherby. Roddenberry had hoped to go while he was still alive. So did Robert Heinlein. Heinlein's ashes were scattered at sea. Robert A. Heinlein, who perhaps more than any other writer visualized and inspired the United States space program, did not even have that privilege.

Twenty-five years ago, it seemed possible that we would have settlements on the moon within ten or twenty years, and on Mars by the first decade of the twenty-first century. Since the last moon landing in 1972, we have had many space triumphs. Robot space exploration through the eighties brought us riches beyond compare. But year after year, shortsighted politicians whittled away at NASA's budget. "What good is that naked little baby in the basket?" they cried. "All it does is kick and eat. When in hell is it going to go to work and earn a living?" Year after year, they tried to smother the baby. They did succeed in stunting its growth. To keep the manned spaceflight program alive, NASA focused on one vehicle, the space shuttle orbiter. This forced the nation to put all its eggs in one basket, at tremendous cost. Other programs and launch vehicles suffered as the NASA bureaucracy became more and more tangled and defensive.

When the space shuttle Challenger exploded, killing seven men and women, the outpouring of grief was tremendous. Surprisingly, few questioned whether we should be in space. A good president would have rallied the public around the disaster and renewed his commitment to space. Ronald Reagan instead turned his back on NASA. Later shuttle triumphs did not entirely remove NASA's stain. Veteran engineers and project managers and space activists, jerked around by the endless budget fight, experienced burn-out. Many of the best left the space program. Visionaries could not marshal enough public support to overcome the gray little minds of the U.S. Congress and the Senate. Again and again it was argued that space was rich with resources, as well as knowledge; that America had always responded to new frontiers with a quickened heartbeat and fresh vigor. But Americans seemed to prefer their space adventures on television and in the movies. We were cocooning in the self-centered, deficit-ridden eighties. An ambitious international space station has been redesigned and cut to a pale shadow. The Delta Clipper, a beautifully engineered single-stage-to-orbit spaceship, whose prototype cost less than two space shuttle toilets, teeters on the brink of being cancelled. It can't find a home at NASA, despite the possibility it could cut orbital costs by more than two-thirds.

With the end of the cold war, hundreds of thousands of our best and brightest minds in aerospace and high-tech defense industries have been put out of work. A revitalized exploratory manned space program could guide us through a bumpy decade, provide some stability in our changing economy, and give our children real dreams and real heroes.

But many powerful politicians do not see it that way. The aerospace industry is still in a slump. The astronaut program is still dependent on the slow and expensive shuttle. And our America is enthusiastically spending billions of dollars on fiber-optics cables to pump more virtual space fantasies



into our homes. The government seems more interested in developing technology to turn us into permanent couch potatoes, then in pioneering a real frontier. Some years ago, a young boy was told that American astronauts had once landed on the moon. He scoffed, "If we had gone to the moon, we'd still be there."

That makes sense. What actually happened is too ridiculous for words.

For KUOW, this is Greg Bear.