

Commentary: 'It's Time to Soar Again' by James Lovell - January 30, 2004

A year ago, we lost seven explorers. The crew of Columbia -- Rick, Willie, Mike, Dave, K.C., Laurel and Ilan -- were dedicated to exploration. They went into space understanding both the inherent risks and the enormous potential benefits, and enthusiastically carried out their mission. The STS-107 crew embodied a calling that is deeply rooted in the human soul -- the desire to climb to the top of the mountain, to travel beyond the horizon, and to comprehend and appreciate the whole of our universe. As we reflect on their achievements and their courage, we must honor their dedication and their humanity, and begin once again to look forward, onward and upward.

Our most immediate goal must be to get the Space Shuttle flying safely again, consistent with the recommendations of Columbia Accident Investigation Board and honor our commitments to completing the International Space Station. The Space Shuttle is a magnificent complex vehicle, and while we must be ever vigilant about minimizing its vulnerabilities, it is ideally suited to this task and will get the job done.

Our obligations to our international partners and to the American taxpayers must not go unfulfilled. The very worthwhile dream of a world-class scientific laboratory in space will be realized, and its benefits will stream earthward for many years to come. But I believe we must look farther ahead and deeper into the cosmos. We've trolled the shallows of low-Earth orbit long enough, and I agree with President Bush that the time has come to set sail once again on the seas of space.

I had the incredible fortune of making two trips to the Moon during the Apollo Program. But I think all of us who shared that privilege realized that what we were doing was just the beginning. We certainly didn't envision the very long pause in building upon what we had done, but we enthusiastically welcome the new vision that President Bush has set forth for NASA and the nation.

How do we proceed and build momentum? I think the correct approach is to explore incrementally, as the President suggests, one small step at a time. We must aim high, carefully measure our progress, and doggedly pursue the ultimate goal of extending human presence across the solar system.

The International Space Station will serve well as a laboratory for understanding how people in space adapt to that unforgiving environment. Before we send men and women on journeys to Mars and beyond, we must be able to quantify and ultimately mitigate the effects, both physiological and psychological, of long duration space exploration. The ISS is the perfect place to do this work.

At the same time, we must continue a robust program of robotic exploration, as exemplified by the recent success of the Mars Exploration Rovers. As we plan for future human missions to the Moon and beyond, our robot scouts will guide us to resources in space and on other bodies in the solar system that our astronauts can process to provide air and water, and perhaps even rocket fuel for their return trips. Like Lewis and Clark two centuries ago, future space explorers will learn to live off the land.

When we return humans to the lunar surface in the next decade, we undoubtedly will build on the science of Apollo, seeking to understand the formation of the Moon and the early history of the solar system. But, more importantly, we will use the Moon as a test bed for the new technologies that will allow us to venture farther. The Moon is far closer to home than Mars, and it's best that we thoroughly understand the requirements of human interplanetary travel before we set out on those perilous journeys.

As we move one step at a time out into the universe, we will also be doing something very important right here at home. The immediate benefit will be high technology jobs and the expansion of our industrial base. America has always been at the technological vanguard and this new program of exploration will insure our pre-eminence as we push across new frontiers. Perhaps the most significant benefit of all is that a renewed sense of purpose in our space program will sow the seeds of inspiration for the next generation of inventors, scientists, innovators and, yes, explorers.

President Kennedy referred to the Apollo Program as "Mankind's greatest adventure." As an astronaut who made those journeys, I'd like to think he was correct. But as I look at the limitless vistas ahead, I have to believe that the greatest adventures are yet to come. We must continue the journey which has only just begun. *Former Astronaut Jim Lovell participated in four NASA space missions: Gemini 7, Commander of Gemini 12, Command Module Pilot and Navigator of Apollo 8 and Commander of the ill-fated Apollo 13. He is the author of the book "Lost Moon" which chronicles his experiences during the Apollo 13 mission.*