

(Jim Slade Commentary, ABC Radio)

August 12, 1991

Kennedy Space Center, August 12th: This is a special place. It is so special that people will come here someday to see where an evolutionary change in human history began.

Our ABC broadcast facilities sit on a mound about a half mile to the right of the big hangers and control rooms where the shuttles are groomed and then fired into orbit. It is easy to forget now that this is the same place where Neil Armstrong and the others stepped off for the moon.

The launch pads themselves are about 3 and a half miles out there toward the ocean. You can see them clearly across acres of tropical scrub and swamp. Birds tumble, squawking, out of those bushes whenever a rocket bellows. But the rockets only sing once in awhile compared to the birds and so far, the birds have always come back.

It's a busy place. This is Monday. Yesterday, space shuttle Atlantis dropped out of the sky here and was led back to the barn, still warm and sweating. This morning, a big tractor carried Discovery out to the same launch pad Atlantis used ten days ago. They hope to launch Discovery in mid September with a huge satellite in its hold that will study how the ozone layer is being depleted and what we humans have to do with it. That is important public business, the kind the shuttles ought to be doing.

As soon as it's ready, Atlantis will be re-serviced and used to launch a missile-warning satellite sometime in November. That's important, too.

Nobody has to tell the people here that their work is important, though. If you didn't have the spirit to work in this place, you would hate it. It takes a lot of pride to stand up to the pressure, some of it, not very fair.

There is a cynical tendency to jeer whenever a big, visible program doesn't work right. Impatience, leavened with the idea that lots of money ought to mean perfection, leads us down that road. The fact of the matter is that non-destructive delays here are a sign of perfection. When a high speed computer stops the clock because it sees trouble in a tiny little gizmo buried among thousands of other tiny little gizmos, I find that nothing short of a miracle. The bottom line here is that no shuttle flies unless everything works at the time of liftoff. Something might break on the way "up the hill," but at that most crucial moment the spacecraft is a hundred percent or it doesn't go. Given the millions of parts and miles of wire in a shuttle, that's saying more than any other engineering or science program has ever been able to say.

If you want to know what's wrong with NASA, you will have to dig back in your history book ten to fifteen years ago when neither the White House nor the Congress could decide if the space program was fish, fowl, or tinker toy. Funding was inadequate to do the job and shortcuts were taken that are showing up only today in projects like the Hubble Space Telescope. More importantly, though, the space agency was getting no direction. No political leader had the interest or the courage to say "this is what we ought to do with the things we have learned," and, as a result, NASA drifted into one enterprise after another, trying to do all there was to do at once. Some great things happened, like Voyager's journey to Neptune by way of the other planets. Some terrible things happened, too, like Challenger.

And I don't think things are much better now, although there has been one commission after another making a study of what the US should be doing in space in the next fifty years. Usually, they say the same thing: go back to the moon and on to Mars. And so far, there has been a lot of political talk about it. But if you look closely, what you still see is drift.

You want to go to space? The people here can do it. Somebody has to say go, but nobody wants to be the one.

When those people visit this place in the future, I wonder if that's what they'll remember.