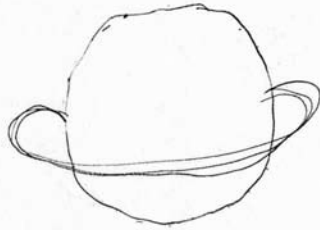


From Our Archives



SPACE STATION REVISITED: THE TRIAL OF THE AMERICAN MIND

By Irene Shaland

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time”

T.S. Eliot

Going to Saturn

Michelle Shaland
1st grade Hawken School.

“Mom, are you really going to build the space station?”-struggling through her tears asked my seven-year-old Michelle as we parted at the airport. “I will certainly try,” I said. And so trying I was, being “drafted” to Washington D.C to work as an interpreter and facilitator for the NASA Space Station Redesign Team during the visit of the Russian delegation. I was living through what seems now the most intensive and exciting three weeks of my life.

In March of 1992, under Presidential orders, NASA began a ninety-day odyssey in redesigning the Space Station Freedom with a goal of drastically trimming its cost while trying to retain its essential capabilities. The redesign effort

takes place in one of the most closely watched arenas in Washington: the federal budget. There is also another stage for this drama--our mind. With less than two weeks left in the Station high-level review, we have yet to convince ourselves in the vital necessity of this project.

A lay person, like myself, who lives daily through the CNN-presented Byzantine world of domestic politics or the sound and fury of newspapers, can easily become frustrated at the very thought of space-related issues. When I joined the Redesign Team in Washington, I saw little sense in continuing to beat our heads against the wall. The wall, I thought, was set up a while ago by “them.” “They” were

those who understood the Station's name Freedom not as a symbol of man's escape from Earth's gravity, but rather as freedom to change certain budget constraint. Sooner or later, I was sure, everybody would realize that the government's best technology investment is no investment at all: it is just the purchase of desired results. After decades of American greatness, here comes the time when we all are too focused on making the next buck instead of investing in the future.

However, the atmosphere I encountered in Washington was different. The Redesign Team engineers do not philosophize. Headed by former astronaut Bryan O'Connor, they simply work around the clock in a situation where deadlines are marked by hours or minutes, not by weeks or days. Pulled from their families and regular jobs, they take no breaks, know no holidays. One cannot exist at the edge of human endurance and produce the quality of the work they do. The obsession by an idea is prerequisite. Driven by the idea to salvage the Station, they know their work will outlast those who have been opposed to it for so long.

For me, these thirty-five people personify NASA's drive to renew itself into a leading force for creativity, innovation, and progress, not only in space, but in American society as well. Answering the challenge to redesign the Station in ninety days, the Team actually has undertaken a job to change a big institution. And this, on a larger scale, reflects our current struggle to grasp: who we are in this country today and what we are going to be tomorrow. Are we really showing signs of being intellectually bankrupt and unable to find solutions to our problems?

When the Russian scientists arrived, they brought an entirely new dimension to the redesign effort. Invited by the US officials, this delegation came to propose how Russia could contribute to the NASA program. Middle-age men, stern and chain-smoking, they were proud old-timers, creators of the innovative space technology. Notwithstanding the uncertain outcome of this visit, the arrival of the Russian group signaled the new era of cooperation and signified the end of Cold War rivalry. It was an irony of history: the very same people were asked to help to save the program that was begat by the conflict with them. Now in a situation inconceivable just a few years ago, the specialists from the opposite sides of the space race could talk, understand, and appreciate each other. Our technical briefings became an intense emotional experience for everybody involved. "These people do not need me," I often thought. "They understand each other from half-a-syllable." I visualized Berlin wall, not a physical but a mental entity, tumbling down in front of our own eyes.

For the Russians, an opportunity to cooperate in building the Station does not mean just another chance to push their hardware, as it is often depicted by our media. "Please help your people to understand," they asked me, "if the world won't use our technology now, it may well disappear along with the fossils of old regime, ruined by anarchy and greed."

For the Americans, cooperation with their Russian counterparts means realization of a dream: the Station in space. "When I walk through the Air and Space Museum, I experience mixed emotions," mused Joe Nieberding (who

along with John Dunning, represents the Lewis Center in the Redesign Team). “On one hand, I am enormously proud of both the Russian and the American achievements in space. On another, I cannot help but think what we could have done together if we were allowed to join our efforts.”

The time has come to show the world and ourselves whether we, the US and Russia, are ready and capable of working together without being fueled by the space race. Or we will let our efforts be strangled by the bureaucracy. The question remains: are we ready to turn our country into a world leader in space or into a place of world-class ignorance and pettiness.

The road into space runs through the Russian town Kaluga, where Tsiolkovsky developed his ideas on aeronautics. The same road passes through Worcester, MA, where Goddard worked on his theory of rockets. It definitely runs through

our children’s minds. Space provides them with inspiration and hope and gets them excited about learning. Like an enchanted mirror from fairy tales, space has no favorites. It may show our greatness or it may reflect our confusion and lack of vision. The future of our children is in our hands. The last target date for having the Station permanently manned by astronauts has been June 2000. “I’ll be so old then,” says Michelle (who was born in 1985). “A real teenager. But I’ll wait.”

Irene Shaland

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