

Remarks by the Honorable Sean O'Keefe  
NASA Administrator  
STS-107 Crew Memorial Service  
First Baptist Church  
Lufkin, Texas  
February 8, 2003

Thank you Reverend Bush (Rev. Bob Bush) for that inspiring prayer.

We at NASA are so grateful to the Lufkin community for organizing this heartfelt tribute to seven brave heroes, the intrepid crew of the Space Shuttle Columbia.

Thank you for taking our NASA family and our colleagues from so many different agencies and departments across the entire Federal government into your homes and embracing them in this community.

Today, you have welcomed us into the Lord's house. This week, you invited us into your homes and your hearts. And for that, you have our enormous gratitude. We are forever indebted for these many kindnesses and generosity.

This morning, we gather together as newfound friends, to celebrate the lives of our Columbia astronauts.

During the past week, people who've participated in the memorials to our fallen astronauts in this country and throughout

the world have learned a great deal about these remarkable explorers. They represent the best of the human spirit.

We've learned about their passionate commitment to science and discovery, the noble work that motivated the Columbia mission.

We learned from them a simple but profound lesson about the value of friendship and teamwork. The astronauts joyfully represented a wonderful tapestry of different races, religions and nationalities. Through their genuine love for each other they demonstrated the potential for all of us to work together in harmony.

And fittingly, through their own sincere convictions, they also expressed the power of faith. Astronaut Bob Cabana who is with us here today, observed at the National Cathedral Memorial just Thursday that he saw this power at work the morning of Columbia's launch when he joined the astronauts in the suit room, where they suit up for going out to the orbiter. Just as the crew was starting to leave for their ride to the launch pad, Bob witnessed Commander Rick Husband bid them to embrace as one, and join in prayer.

And now, in their memory, we do the same.

We will never forget the wonderful legacy of the Columbia astronauts. And this is a particularly poignant moment. It is at this

time seven days ago, we joined family members and friends gathered in Florida, waiting to welcome our beloved astronauts home.

It started out as a very happy morning. The enthusiasm for the celebration of a very successful return was upon all of us. Then it became apparent that it was to end in tragedy.

Just as words can't fully express the admiration that our entire Nation, and indeed the people of the world feel right now for the Columbia astronauts, we at NASA are struggling to find the proper words to thank the people of Lufkin and the surrounding communities for your vital help in this important recovery effort.

With your support, we have made great progress in the Columbia debris recovery effort. We're confident the debris will provide us valuable clues to help us figure out what caused the loss of Columbia and its crew. And once we understand the cause of the accident, we will correct what problems we find, and make sure this never happens again, so that we can continue the important work that Columbia's crew inspired.

The exploration of space will continue. On Tuesday in Houston, President Bush said, "This course of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose. It is a desire written in the human heart where that part of creation seeks to understand all creation."

The President also recently observed that, “Americans are a resolute people who have risen to every test of our time. Adversity has revealed the character of our country, to the world and to ourselves.” That character has been on display here in Lufkin throughout this week.

The good people of Lufkin could not have possibly planned for the over 1500 folks from more than 20 different federal agencies, state and local organizations who descended upon you in order to carry out the vital work that is centered here in your community.

You have greeted us with out hesitation and with tremendous hospitality.

Many families, businesses and organizations generously donated time, food, and equipment. This incredible outpouring of assistance is being supplemented by the nonstop support we are getting from our friends from the Salvation Army and the American Red Cross.

Now early on in the recovery effort, one of our officials on the ground was asked if he had any immediate needs. The response was, “Well, we could use some water.” Well soon, he got some water...a tractor-trailer full of bottled water donated by a local store. Local Boy Scout troops lived up to the scouting motto by helping to feed our people. And there is Pat Fulford. She was

so focused on preparing hot meals for all the people who are engaged in this that she was stunned to learn that she and her husband Norm's house was consumed by fire. These are just two examples of the many kindnesses that we will never forget and that we are indebted to you for.

I suspect that Reverends Bush, Williams and Kennedy have preached to many of you about the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's clear that the people of Lufkin have taken this lesson to heart. This past week, the eyes of the world were on the people of Lufkin and surrounding communities. You have made the Nation proud.

I'd also like to thank Governor Perry, and all of the Texas State officials who have done so much to support all that we are engaged in. Everything that we've asked for from the State of Texas, the Governor has immediately responded to.

We've also received tremendous cooperation from the U.S. Forest Service, the National Guard, local law enforcement officials, and from off-duty volunteer officers. General Bennett Landenreau is here representing Governor Foster from the state of Louisiana, who've been engaged in the same activity and all the work going on between Texas and Louisiana as we've searched this entire area to come to conclusion on exactly what happened. We appreciate your tireless work to help coordinate this massive effort.

It is our fervent wish that we could have made all of your acquaintance under different circumstances. But we are thankful to you that in this time of need, you were here for us.

So much has changed in a week. Indeed, for many of us in the NASA family, our lives have changed completely.

First, among them are the courageous of the seven heroic crew members. They have been an inspiration to the President and to us all.

Our hearts may be filled with sorrow now, but let us take comfort in the knowledge that there is so much about these heroic astronauts for us to be grateful about.

And as we search for solace, may we also find comfort in a verse of Eternal Father Strong to Save. As the son of a Navy submariner, I always thought it was just named the Navy Hymn. It was written this verse, especially for our astronauts:

Eternal Father, King of birth,  
Who didst create the heaven and earth,  
And bid the planets and the sun  
Their own appointed orbits run;  
O hear us when we seek thy grace  
For those who soar through outer space.

At this exact hour, at this exact moment those seven courageous souls were due back at Cape Canaveral, Florida. So in tribute to those courageous souls—Rick Husband, Willie McCool,

Mike Anderson, David Brown, Laurel Clark, Kapana Chawla, and Ilan Ramon—who are now in God’s welcoming embrace, please join me in a moment of silence, to be followed by the ringing of seven chimes.

May God bless the crew of STS-107 and their families, and those who mourn for these valiant explorers.