

Congressman Dana Rohrabacher Opening Statement

America once again has had to endure the tragedy of losing a Space Shuttle crew. The hard working and patriotic people of NASA have known all too well the risks associated with space exploration, especially manned missions. Unfortunately, twice in the past 17 years we have been reminded of the dangers of human space flight with the destruction of the Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986 and now the Columbia. Seventeen years ago, we took a step back after the tragedy and to our satisfaction pinpointed and corrected at least the technical causes of the loss. Today I am confident Admiral Gehman and his commission will get to the truths that will help us understand Columbia's fatal accident.

Many of the questions that need to be addressed, however, transcend the immediate technical and managerial problems of this tragedy. The lack of long-term goals, or a unifying vision for America's space effort, for example, needs to be addressed. This failing weakened efforts that would have led to the replacement of the Shuttle system long before age became a factor, and age was a factor. This gives us as an opportunity to revisit the fundamentals and make recommendations that will chart America's future space endeavors.

NASA's leadership has faced, and will continue to face, the challenge of exercising responsible stewardship of limited resources, while providing a coherent blueprint of what is to be accomplished and how. Hopefully, forward-looking strategies will lead us to incremental technological advances. A new propulsion system might be a good start. But before we can move forward, we must fully understand why seven heroes perished.

Questions

- 1) The Space Shuttle is based on a 30-year-old design concept and it was the best we could do at the time. Given the age of the Shuttle and NASA's restructured space transportation program, should we be accelerating alternatives to the Shuttle, and if not, why?
- 2) NASA has had a poor record on trying to develop new technologies to replace the Shuttle. For example, X-33, X-34, X-38, NASP, the National Launch System, ALS, etc. have all been disappointments. In light of the Columbia accident, what steps are you taking to ensure your new space transportation plan also does not become a disappointment?