

## **OPENING STATEMENT HONORABLE RALPH M. HALL**

**February 27, 2003**

Good morning. I want to welcome Administrator O'Keefe to today's hearing. I know that all the Members wish that we could be hearing about NASA's new budget request under happier circumstances.

One of this Committee's roles will be to understand the root causes of the Columbia accident and to put in safeguards to try to prevent such an accident from happening again. Yesterday, I met with Admiral Gehman, the head of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board. He expressed his determination to get to the cause of the accident and to identify any contributing factors. This Committee should not shrink from asking tough questions of NASA-and of ourselves-to identify the proper corrective measures.

Over the next many months we will need to determine the impact of the Columbia accident on NASA's budget and programs. Today we will try to understand the rationale for some of the budgetary cuts and enhancements that are part of this request. For example, why is funding for aeronautics R&D cut over the next five years? Why is NASA's Commercial Technology program being terminated? And why does the Shuttle upgrades budget continue to lag relative to the original plan, while important upgrades continue to be deferred?

At the same time, the budget request finds room for some expensive new missions. A year after OMB cancelled the one billion dollar Europa Orbiter mission because it was too expensive, NASA is now proposing to undertake a four billion dollar mission to Jupiter's icy moons. Two years after OMB deferred work on the \$1.4 billion U.S. Crew Return Vehicle for the International Space Station, NASA is now proposing to spend what it estimates could be ten times as much on an Orbital Space Plane.

The Columbia accident has reinforced the priority of astronaut safety. I continue to be concerned that we have not more vigorously pursued Space Shuttle crew survivability systems in the 17 years since the Challenger accident. Weight issues originally related to the need to be able to lift Space Station modules into orbit may not be relevant now that we are nearing the end of the Space Station assembly, and cost issues need to be examined in the light of NASA's willingness to find the money to undertake other expensive new initiatives.

Much the same arguments apply to the U.S. Crew Return Vehicle (CRV). The U.S. had a program to develop a U.S. CRV for the International Space Station. In fact, developing such a rescue vehicle is a U.S. responsibility under the international agreements governing the Space Station program. OMB deferred the CRV project two years ago, and NASA cancelled all work related to it last year. Now we are told that if we approve the "multipurpose" Orbital Space Plane project, we will have a CRV-but not until the end of the decade and at a cost perhaps ten times higher than the estimated cost of the X-38 based CRV fleet. The logic of that approach eludes me.

NASA has said that the Orbital Space Plane will supplement-not replace-the Space Shuttle. Doesn't that mean that we will be flying both the Shuttle and the Orbital Space Station to and from the Space Station? If so, aren't we and our International Partners locking ourselves into higher Space Station operating costs? This doesn't sound like a good idea to me.

I have an even more fundamental problem with the decision to cancel the dedicated U.S. CRV in favor of the so-called "multipurpose" Orbital Space Plane. We are now facing serious decisions on the future of the Space Station due to the grounding of the Shuttle fleet for an indefinite period. At least we have a means of evacuating the Space Station crew if necessary. What happens if we build the "multipurpose" Orbital Space Plane system? We then are dependent on the same vehicle design and subsystems for both Space Station crew rescue and crew transport to and from the Space Station. When we have the inevitable problem with the Orbital Space Plane (as we have had on multiple occasions with the Space Shuttle fleet over the years), we will not only have to ground the Orbital Space Plane crew transfer vehicle fleet but also suspend use of the Orbital Space Plane crew rescue vehicles attached to the Space Station until we determine whether or not there is a systemic problem. That is the increased vulnerability that comes from dependence on a common vehicle design to meet different missions. I don't think that's a vulnerability we should or need to accept.

I could raise additional concerns, but the fundamental question is whether we are willing to delay developing systems that could increase the survivability of our Shuttle and Space Station astronauts in the event of an emergency or whether we instead should try to provide that extra protection as soon as practicable. I think that the responsible answer to that question is obvious, and I intend to introduce legislation in the very near future to address the problem.

I would also note that Mr. Lampson is introducing legislation today which would promote the safety and viability of the Space Station and its crew.

Thank you, and I yield back the balance of my time.