

Global Journalist: Space Shuttle Columbia disaster

Abstract: This is a conversation on February 6, 2003 between Stuart Loory and journalists about the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster on February 1, 2003. They discuss their predictions for the American space program going forward, as well as the progression of the space programs of China, Russia, and Israel.

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Runtime: 28:16

Stuart Loory 00:06

Global Journalist on KBIA. This is the program that says mid-Missourians, indeed many Americans, are interested in international news. I'm Stuart Loory of the Missouri School of Journalism. Coming to you again from London. The newspapers today are all concentrating on Secretary of State Colin Powell's justification for going to war against Iraq at the United Nations yesterday. And that is certainly an important story. But I thought we would concentrate on another story that is dramatic, forlorn, and fraught with significance for the future of humanity's exploration of the unknown. I'm talking of course of the breakup of the Space Shuttle Columbia, as it was coming back to Earth last Saturday. Manned space flight has long been a fascination for me. I covered all of the first American-manned space flights, Project Mercury for the New York Herald Tribune in the 1960s. And then I covered the first flight, the Space Shuttle Columbia, the first flight of any space shuttle, for CNN in 1981. I have never covered a disaster, only triumphs, but there have certainly been previous fatalities in space. Now, we have another disaster that may shut down manned spaceflight in this country, the United States that is, for a long time to come. And it has reopened the old debate of whether manned spaceflight is really necessary. So there's a lot to talk about, and to help sort things out our guests today are in Los Angeles, George Lewis, a correspondent of the National Broadcasting Company, who has been covering this story this week of the space shuttle disaster in Texas. In Beijing, Ted Anthony, China

News Editor of the Associated Press. In Moscow, Aleksandr Gurnov, he is Head of the International Department of Russian State Television. And in Jerusalem, Hanan Sher, senior editor of The Jerusalem Report. George Lewis, let's start with you. What went wrong? What are they saying now about what the possibilities are for the start of this disaster?

George Lewis 02:20

Stuart they that's the big question, what went wrong, and NASA isn't so sure at this point. Initially, they were concentrating on a piece of foam insulation that fell off the shuttle's external fuel tank and struck the left wing. They thought perhaps that triggered a loss of the thermal protective tiles on the underside of the shuttle, that that may have led to the disaster, but now they're discounting that. They don't think that the installation had enough mass to cause that kind of damage. They're now looking at the possibility that on reentry, the shuttle may have hit a micromedia or some sort of space junk. And the reason they're that theory is gaining some prominence is that they've been reviewing all the pictures of the shuttle's re entry. And they noticed that the the glow around the spacecraft the cloud of plasma that develops when the shuttle begins to hit the Earth's atmosphere, that cloud of plasma changed colors suddenly, as the shuttle was re entering, that that may indicate that it struck something in space on its way back to back to Earth.

Stuart Loory 03:31

Yeah but it's it's obviously going to take weeks if not months before the investigation is completed. George, why is it that, well let me put it this way. In the newspaper accounts that I read here, there was not much of a voice report from the astronauts themselves. Is that so?

George Lewis 03:56

Well, you hear them talking, you hear the ground controllers who are monitoring the temperatures on the shuttle, begin to talk about the unusual readings they're getting in the wheel wells of the shuttle and and then you just hear a brief section of a couple of words from the shuttle itself but no discussion from the space shuttle itself. They don't have any problems and then then they begin to lose the signal from the shuttle they're going to. A NASA investigators been going into Mexico [or in New Mexico?] to the last ground station the shuttle was in contact with the to try to analyze the very last communications to get gather every little bit of data from the shuttle. They know that the shuttle began to have problems over California and the whole the whole ground investigation looking for debris has moved westward now, they're looking for perhaps the first pieces of debris that fell off the shuttle, perhaps over California to give them the key clues as to how this disaster unfolded.

Stuart Loory 05:01

Hmm.

Hanan Sher 05:04

Could I inset a comment Stuart? This is going on in Jerusalem. One of the things that I noticed, and George's accounts, of course, is very gripping. But it has one great advantage for NASA. And I don't I would be the last one to accuse anyone of anything. But it is the only pieces that I know of which which creates, which is the no-blame kind of thesis and that and that is also convenient. So I would, I would always look at that very, very carefully. Now. I don't know I certainly hope that they're honest and

forthright about it. But that's that's something that in my experience as a journalist one always has to look at.

Stuart Loory 05:36

So what you're saying is that even though there was original speculation that it might have been the foam and now NASA backing away from it, they could be doing that because it would leave blame with the NASA engineers and and technicians.

George Lewis 05:55

Stuart this George Lewis, let me interject something. I think NASA is like going to be looking at multiple causes. It could be it could be the foam plus some other event. The at this point the investigators are not trying to rule anything in and not trying to rule anything out. And yes, I think we as journalists have to be very aware of any attempts of NASA to cover its tracks because there certainly were indications of that in 1986 with it with the other shuttle disaster

Stuart Loory 06:25

In 1986, was that the time of the the O-ring theory?

George Lewis 06:31

Right.

Stuart Loory 06:32

And they denied that it was the O-rings. And then later on, they came back and admitted it.

George Lewis 06:38

Right, exactly.

Stuart Loory 06:40

And that caused the the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger so that NASA at that time, although they might have been trying to cover up, they they certainly came clean when they when they discovered what the problem really was.

George Lewis 06:59

The thing that's happening here is that there are multiple investigations. Not only is NASA investigating, there is an outside panel of government experts, people from the US Air Force and the US Navy who have a great deal of experience in aeronautics, who are going to be backstopping the investigation and and Congress as well will be investigating. So we do have multiple investigations going on here.

Stuart Loory 07:22

Right. Gurnov, the responsibility for manned spaceflight for the present, now goes to Russia. Where the space program was, was once supreme and now it's not in such good shape. There is of course, a problem with three or two cosmonauts and an astronaut in the manned space station, who were going to have to be brought back to Earth at some point or resupplied. Is Russia going to be able to handle this?

Aleksandr Gurnov 08:02

Well, first of all, I would like to I like to give my my deep condolences to the American nations who I know is now is now going through a real shock. And also I understand to Hanan and the people in Israel who lost a man on the space flight. Well, I guess that this is the feeling of all the Russian people. And as your question, I know that that we have already, the Russians I mean the Russian side, participating in the in the space program has have made a decision and an announcement that the Russian spaceship, Progress it's called, if I'm not mistaken, will have to cover for the space shuttle it will have to first of all to lift the space station to a higher orbit which previously was planned to be done by the shuttle. So this this is possible that this problem can be solved by the Russian space, finished with going there, the problem of supplies will also be covered adequately by the by the Russian spaceship progress. The the the transport is getting there, they're getting to the stage. And so I think I think that that the cosmonauts the astronauts that are onbaord and also the American people, the all the participants of the space program, can count fully on the Russians that they'll do their part of the job, and whatever we can also do to to sit in for for the last American spaceship.

Stuart Loory 09:45

Sasha [aka Aleksandr] let me ask you there was at one time, a plan to build a Russian Space Shuttle. And as a matter of fact, there is a model of that space shuttle on display in Moscow. It looked very much like the American space shuttle. Is there any chance that the Russians will go back to trying to construct that space shuttle?

Aleksandr Gurnov 10:11

Well, first of all, it was not only the model, we actually built one and it flew into space. It was an unmanned flight. And what it did was it was a tremendous thing. We we put a Russian shuttle that really looked well pretty much like the American shuttle, and it went into space automatically, and no crew and it landed with and it missed the original targets something like like five inches so so it was a great job that the people that there was a decade ago, but then it was the shuttle that went to space was turned was turned into an exhibit. And right now it's given to kids and the people that just go to to watch it. And then I think about a year ago, the roof collapsed on the big space object somewhere in Russia where they build those things. So, that was another disaster. I think the main disaster is money. We have pretty pretty serious problems in the Russian economy which you may know and you're surely are aware of. And this is a subject of another program. I mean radio program, not this but I think this is the main reason that we have that the Russians have quit with this with this shuttle program. But still, we are still a pretty good at the at the traditional space program with a traditional ships, not the shuttles, and as far as I know, we're making pretty good money on that program.

Stuart Loory 11:55

How about Sher, does Israel have any kind of space program in development of its own?

Hanan Sher 12:05

Not a manned space program. For that we will we will be relying Stuart on the Americans of course because we do because again if the Russians have a have a budget problem, we certainly have budget problems too, and budget problems now. But we do have and have had a space program of some

some consequence at least to us for for the past 20 years Ilan Ramon is not was not our astronaut was not an exception. He was rather a product of of a program which is put up five satellites, including several with with imaging capacities which are used for the obvious things that imaging satellites would be used for, which may be a particular use now, I might say in the in the very near future. Yeah, and that space program will probably go ahead but but as but as for a man, a manned flight, there's no there's no thought of that at all.

Stuart Loory 12:54

And Ted Anthony, what about China? I think China has an interest in in space, also. I think I've read even manned space.

Ted Anthony 13:04

Well Stuart, China has made it very clear that it wants to be the next nation to put human beings in space. It's made that clear domestically, and it's made that clear internationally. And both of those are, they're separate messages really. The Chinese government right now is, as you're probably aware, China is going through some real fundamental economic changes. It's opening up to the world, it's experimenting with what it likes to call it's socialist market economy, which involves encouraging capitalism to make money to industrialize to modernize while still maintaining the doctrinaire communism, or at least at least paying lip service to that. So in that context, the space program for China is very much it's it's very evocative in a lot of ways of the optimism about space travel that was present in the United States in the 1960s. You hear a lot here about the glory of reaching the stars about how the how a manned space program would allow China to take its place among among the premier nations of the world. China has launched so far four spacecraft in a series called the Shenzhou series, now Shenzhou stands for, or it means in Chinese "sacred vessel" which gives you a sense of the importance to which the Chinese attach to this program. The fourth one was launched in late December, orbited the Earth several times came back several days later and landed on land in China, according to the Chinese government without incident, but the interesting thing was, while it was in the air this time, Chinese officials made it known that the Shenzhou 5 the next in the sequence would be a manned mission. Now, we've heard different reports we've heard that it would be later this year we've heard that it would be the second half of this year but but all the reports tend to indicate that they are ready to take this step. The Shenzhou 4 was adjudicated to be safe for a human being. The last two flights of Chinese spacecraft have apparently carried mannequins and experiments that simulate the effect of space on a human body. So China's very at this point, very bullish about not only actually sending a Chinese human being into space, but letting the world know that it's doing that as well.

Stuart Loory 15:19

Okay, Ted, we have to take a break now. This is Global Journalists on KBIA. I'm Stuart Loory. We'll be right back. Welcome back to Global Journalist, you may listen to this program again, ask questions or make comments by going to [www dot global journalists.org](http://www.globaljournalists.org) or in mid Missouri by calling us at 573-882-9641. Before the break, we were talking to Ted Anthony about China getting into manned spaceflight. What I have noticed in reading the papers, both here in Europe and in the United States in the last couple of days, is that there is a lot being written about whether or not we really need a manned space program. It's an old debate about whether unmanned space flight can accomplish as much as spaceflight. George, do you see that kind of debate getting more intense in the United States?

George Lewis 16:27

Certainly Stuart, if you look at the op ed pages of all the major newspapers in the United States, that debate has there been very much revived. I've been spending the last two days near the Johnson Space Center in Houston, where that debate does not go on because that community is very dependent on manned spaceflight. And and they all feel that the program will continue in spite of the renewed debate.

Stuart Loory 16:54

And Sasha what about in Russia?

Aleksandr Gurnov 16:59

Yes, well this discussion has popped up a couple of times in the history of Russian and Soviet aerospace. Well, first, first of all, you know that we also had a couple of major disasters and lots of lives in...obligation space. So when you remember when, when we were ahead of America all the time, and then Americans finally were the first to put a man on the moon. But we said that the Russians said that well, we don't want to do that, because we're switching to an unmanned program of moon exploration that the that putting a man on the moon is just sort of a political thing. Americans needed that to prove that they're first in something, but this is no use. Well, well, first of all, I think, well, my colleagues touched a couple of moments ago on the subject of who is to blame for what happened in America. Well, this is a very Russian thing. As soon as something happens, first of all, we want to know who to blame. Well, I think that this is a bad at that seat to follow. And I wouldn't, I wouldn't suggest to them that the American follow in the footsteps of Russian character over here. I think that we all are to blame that we've become a little bit too careless about manned spaceflight. We we think of them as something pretty usual and so on and so forth. And we forgetting that actually, men don't belong in space. Well, I mean, if God had wanted men to fly, he would have given him wings. So so whenever we go somewhere where we will don't belong, it never becomes routine, every time it's a heroic deed by the people who go to space by the people who take the responsibility to send them there. Let a family to let them go there. So we should understand that. Then another thing that I've heard a couple of times in Russia especially after after your recent tragedy is that is that spaceships are still the face of transport on Earth. Because if you count the number of miles covered by people in this space, the coast and in cars or airplanes or anything else and and count how many peoples will have devoted to the American family. Yeah. So but, but still, but still we should, we should realize that one of the main reasons of putting man into space is a political reason, is the reason of national prestige, is a sort of a sport of thing a thing is to add on the world to who's the head in technology. So I think that greater international international cooperation in space exploration, and especially in unmanned technologies may be a very, very adequate solution for years ahead, when we don't really, as I understand, as a journalist, we don't really have a necessity, a vital necessity, other than political, of keeping people in outer space 360 days a year.

Stuart Loory 20:33

Sasha, if I could just interrupt you for a second and return the discussion to George Lewis, the International Space Station, which is going to rely greatly on the ability to get people and supplies back and forth, was going to rely on the the American space shuttle program. The International Space

Program has representation from Brazil, Japan, France, Russia and and other countries. It would seem to me that under those circumstances, it would be difficult if not impossible to abandon manned spaceflight.

George Lewis 21:18

Well, certainly, the question is, in the minds of everyone around NASA, when will the shuttle program start flying again? After the Challenger disaster, the shuttles were grounded for 32 months. They can't really afford to do that this time because of all the work that's going on the International Space Station. That program as you say, is very, very dependent on the shuttle for moving supplies up to outer space. And so everyone at NASA is hoping that that the investigation will conclude rapidly and the shuttles will resume flying but that's that's the big "if" right now. And everyone is sort of keeping their fingers crossed that the delay won't be too long and that the loss of jobs around the Space Center in Houston at the end of the Cape in Florida that the loss of jobs won't be too much because when the shuttle was grounded before 8000 jobs in the Houston area went away.

Stuart Loory 22:18

Hanan Sher, Ilan Ramon was buried on Tuesday. Is the story still alive in Israel?

Hanan Sher 22:31

It's very much alive. Our press which has never been known for its conservatism has has been full of stories has been full of stories about the possible reasons for the crash and the great impact here for for another reason too. As as everyone knows, we've gone through about 30 months of not very, not very pleasant times more unpleasant than usual. And Ilan Ramon sort of represented the many people here I think a kind of way out was kind of looking up and looking at something that was brighter. And I think there was a tremendous shock on the whole country when, when what happened when the tragedy happened, and when he was lost together with everyone else. But despite that, I think that, and I don't I don't exactly know why or what, but I've not heard a single word said here. And I've looked at the story very carefully, that said that Israel shouldn't have sent someone up into space, we shouldn't have had an astronaut. As matter of fact, I think the opposite is probably true. We, in some ways, we're worse off than anybody else, because we're sort of one to one, our one astronaut is was lost there and, and hundreds or dozens of other astronauts have been up. And in the kind of way we people here, think think that it's something that's important to us again, and I think we're also convinced, as I said before, about the importance of us a space program again. I think it's singular that, in this in the group of people you have you have somebody you have people from superpowers. And you have and you and you have somebody from a country with, with 8 million with less than 6.5 or 7 million people. And the fact that that we are also is that Israel was also singularly and surprisingly in every kind of way a space power, I think is it's a source of pride and it's sort of very much more than pride, because there are great, they are great security implications to it. I can give you one example, if I may. The fact is that 11 years ago or 12 years ago, when we took Scud missiles we relied, Israel relied on the warning that came from American satellite to that delivery to take off and there was something of a delay. I've been trying to figure out how much of a delay it was. It was a half a minute or so, between the time that the Americans received the signal and knew that Scud missiles were being fired from two places called H2 and H3 in western Iraq, and the time that that signal was passed on to Israel, and there were people who said, I think then and since then that that, that's 30 seconds might be critical, particularly if the

warhead on such on such a Scud, or to be less than, were to be unconventional. And people to get into sealed rooms and the other kind of defensive measures that we took it in the margin was with the more we could increase the margin the safer people here would feel and I think one of the reasons that people here feel a little bit safer this time is that we have several satellites called Ofeq which are which are intelligent, which are very small, intelligence-gathering satellites and we have we probably have good information is anyone. I would suspect that with everything because we have always been focused on the threat area around us but the Israeli satellite program is probably provided at least as good intelligence on this area as anybody else's. Which I think is very important for us.

Stuart Loory 26:00

Right, if I can just ask George Lewis, what do you expect the United States is going to do now about getting other countries involved in the manned space program? We seem to have had a sort of a little mini program of inviting astronauts from other countries. Will that continue?

George Lewis 26:23

I think that will continue. There's obviously going to be a lot of skepticism about man in space for some time after this until the mystery of what happened, the shuttle is solved. But, you know, I think we all tend to take spaceflight for granted. We get very blaise about it, it's still a very risky proposition. And and this reminds us of that, in a very forceful way.

Stuart Loory 26:49

Ted Anthony, allow me to ask you the last question. Can you give us any idea of when the Chinese might be ready to put a man in space?

Ted Anthony 27:00

Well Stuart, all indications are that it's going to be tried, attempted, at least toward the end of this year. The Chinese have a way of putting information out in sort of a sequential manner that allows them to control the build up of excitement. And they do that very well. All the media here is at least all of the domestic media is state controlled, and they have a very big hand in deciding what the nation thinks. They clearly have chosen in these recent weeks before the Columbia destruction to to put that in the forefront to whip up public sentiments.

Stuart Loory 27:36

Right. I'm sorry, I do have to cut you off. We are out of time. Our guests today have been George Lewis of NBC in Los Angeles, Aleksandr Gurnov of Russian state television in Moscow, Ted Anthony of the Associated Press in Beijing, and Hanan Sher of the Jerusalem Report in Jerusalem. Our director is Mary Furness, and our producers, Sarah Andrea Fajardo and Ronda Razi (ph?) for all, I'm Stuart Loory, Global Journalist will be back next week.