
Is sabotage grounding the West's space program?

Carol White reports on the evidence of Soviet involvement in the recent space disasters in Europe and the U.S.

On July 14, the head of NASA, Dr. James Fletcher, confirmed that the earliest date of a new Shuttle launch has been postponed until some time in 1988. In a subsequent briefing, Adm. Richard Truly, head of the Office of Space Flight for NASA, reported that the reason for the delay was the necessity for testing related to new tooling for modular insulation in the solid rocket booster.

Since funds have yet to be allocated to rebuild a fourth orbiter, one can assume that problems in retooling are exacerbated by the cost-cutting mentality that has plagued NASA, and the Shuttle program in particular. However, the general decline in the aerospace industry, since its 1968 peak period, is also no doubt a contributing cause to problems now arising in the process of retooling.

As *EIR* has reported previously, one of the worst decisions made by the Carter administration, was to stop the production of expendable rockets as the Shuttle became available. Because of that, the United States has been literally grounded since the Shuttle accident, on Jan. 28 of this year. Yet, Donald Regan has been using his position as White House chief of staff, to reverse President Reagan's stated wish to rebuild the Challenger, by posing the decision as a trade-off against rebuilding expendable launch capabilities.

The failure to adequately fund NASA now, will mean that the United States is ceding the frontiers of space to the Soviet Union. Such a decision would be nothing short of treason; yet, it is precisely the direction in which cost-accounting is ineluctably taking us, by the cumulative effects of what appear to be small decisions, taken over time.

The narrow margins under which the U.S. space program has operated have not only made us extremely vulnerable to accident, but they have created the ideal conditions for Soviet sabotage. There has undoubtedly been attrition in production

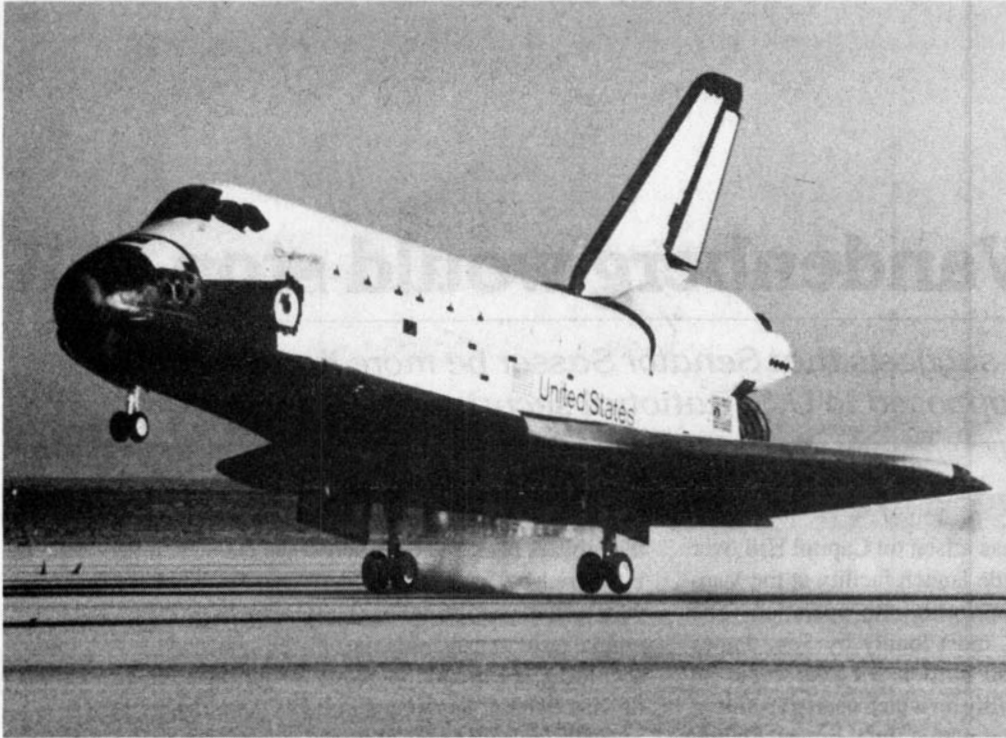
and safety standards; these not only make the act of sabotage easier, but make the coverup of such sabotage plausible.

Due to an extraordinary series of what were apparently accidents, the West is presently grounded, while the Soviet space program makes steady progress. Even before the Ariane rocket failed on May 30, the occurrence of such a series of accidents during the past year, including two Titans, the Shuttle, and a Delta rocket, was considered so unlikely that odds were being quoted at one chance in ten thousand. Now, there is further substantiation of the thesis that these "accidents" were all, or partially, the result of Soviet sabotage.

On July 6, Tad Szulc published an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, in which he claimed that the French government is now investigating the possibility that the May 30 explosion of the European Space Agency Ariane rocket was caused by sabotage. While this bombshell has been denied by official spokesmen of both the United States and France, Szulc claims that France's Defense Minister, André Giraud touched on this topic when he visited Washington three weeks ago. He tied in the Ariane explosion to the series of catastrophes involving American space launches this year."

Many who were unconvinced about the hypothesis of sabotage before the Delta rocket failure, were convinced then that more was amiss than faulty production controls. The U.S. Delta rocket exploded on May 3, 1986, after a string of 43 successful flights. The failure of the Titan 34D rocket in the summer of 1985 has been attributed to a failure of the turbo pump in the liquid rocket engines, and the Challenger disaster has been pinned down to a failure of a solid-fuel rocket booster joint, but explanations in the other cases are more speculative. And even in these cases, sabotage of essential parts could have occurred.

The April 1986 accident of the Titan has been ascribed to



The Space Shuttle Challenger lands at Edwards Air Force Base after seven days in space, June 28, 1983.

the insulation of the solid rocket booster being separated from its casing. This would have prevented the casing from functioning, and caused a quick fuel burn-through. While this is a plausible explanation, no flaw in the design of the rocket has been found which would have contributed to such an aberrant malfunctioning:

Although the failure of the U.S. Delta rocket is attributed to mechanical vibrations, which presumably caused an electrical short to occur, repeated tests designed to test this hypothesis have failed to do so. To date, no design failure in the rocket has been found, and the existence of any such pattern of vibration, leading to mechanical damage of the electrical wiring, is a mere unsubstantiated surmise.

Right after the Delta explosion, Delta project manager William Russell raised the question of sabotage, because of the manner in which the malfunction occurred as an electrical short, following two voltage drops which showed up as sharp spikes. He told the press, "We feel this is quite a significant find, but . . . you don't jump to conclusions.

"We're still going back and looking at all the prelaunch processing of the vehicle," he said, "to make sure we didn't do something to precipitate all this. We have not totally ruled out sabotage. . . . We have a group of people looking at just that phenomenon. If you wanted to sabotage one, how would you?" Earlier, J. Watkins, commander of the 1st Strategic Aerospace Division, said much the same thing regarding the Titan accident on April 18. He said, "Sabotage is something we can't discount."

Szulc's report is denied by European Space Agency President Frederic d'Allest, who is quoted remarking: "Every

time there is a failure, everyone can think that sabotage occurred." Despite d'Allest's denial, so far, there is no explanation as to why the third-stage engine of the Ariane rocket failed to ignite properly, triggering a self-destruct order 4 minutes and 30 seconds after launch.

U.S. investigative commissions have also publicly denied the possibility of Soviet sabotage. Notwithstanding, the case for sabotage cannot be dismissed on the basis of existing evidence—particularly in the case of the Delta and Ariane rockets, but in the other cases as well.

Szulc raises the possibility of tampering with rocket telemetry by the Soviets, who in all likelihood had access to U.S. codes. According to him, three years ago, a U.S. Air Force officer who specialized in space-launch command, control, and communications for satellite surveillance systems, disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

It is believed that he either deserted to or was captured by the Soviets, while he was on a trip to the Netherlands on assignment to NATO. One of his responsibilities had been the training of range officers in charge of destroying rockets which malfunctioned after they were launched.

The official denials of sabotage by the French and the Americans should not be given undue weight. They should rather be seen in the broader context of U.S.-Soviet relations. Were the U.S. or the French government to admit that the Soviets had launched such an attack, a policy of appeasement toward mounting Soviet aggression would no longer be tolerable to the people of either nation. It's about time that Donald Regan's sabotage of the program was viewed in the same light!