



CHALLENGER REVEALED

An Insider's Account of How
the Reagan Administration
Caused the Greatest Tragedy
of the Space Age

RICHARD C. COOK

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A book that tells an insider's story of why the space shuttle Challenger blew up just over one minute after launch on January 28, 1986. It took twenty-one years for me to complete the narrative. To ask why it took so long is legitimate, though books are constantly being published on historical events which took place decades or even centuries ago, bringing new perspectives, evidence, and arguments. So a new book on one of the signature events of the 20th century may itself be a contribution to the historical literature.

But the real reason had more to do with my own personal circumstances. I wrote much of the book by 1991 from a massive archive of notes, interviews, documentary sources, and my own published articles on the subject. But at that point, I was still a government employee. I felt I owed it to my family not to jeopardize my position. I put the archive away in boxes and placed them in the attic.

More years passed. My views of the Challenger story developed. By now I had reached the thirty-year mark of my tenure with the federal government, so I was eligible for retirement. I had always known that the book had to be written so that the public could see beyond the official accounts. I also had a personal story to tell. And the Challenger saga sheds light on today's crisis in government, where the honesty of public officials in explaining the true rationale for events and decisions is so much in question.

So an urgent need to finish the book had appeared. For six months I wrote every night and weekend, seeing new connections and clarifying points and issues that had been obscure. Again I read the record of the Presidential Commission's hearings and the House and Senate hearings and reports. Finally, I was satisfied that I had explained the disaster as completely as I could, including my own role as the NASA analyst who had documented engineers' concerns about a possible catastrophe before it took place and their judgment afterward that it had been a preventable accident. The experience of writing the book was also personally cathartic, allowing me to relive those trying days and make sense of them to myself, my family, and as many others as I would be able to reach through publication.

The space shuttle Challenger disaster and its aftermath were devastating to me personally. The event deeply shocked our nation and the world. But the complete story of what happened to cause it, and how various parties within the government, including the Presidential Commission, tried to gloss over critical aspects of it, has never been told.

My book is an attempt to correct that omission. A factor which gave my effort impetus was my belief that during the mid-1980s, when the disaster occurred, our country began to walk a dangerous path from being the world's leading industrial democracy to what is starting to resemble today a military imperial state. As my book shows, the underlying causes of the Challenger tragedy were the militarization of the U.S. manned space program by the Reagan administration and the political imperatives of top-down management. The disaster should have provided an early warning about what was going on during the military build-up of those days. But it did not, because the official investigations made it appear that the problems were "communications," "schedule pressure," and "technical decision-making" and that the incident itself was an "accident." These representations were far from accurate.

The writing of the book was extraordinarily painful, as the reading of it may also be to sensitive readers. But it was also a healing experience. After suffering for almost two decades from various wounded feelings, I ultimately realized that every person involved in the tragedy and subsequent events only did what seemed right to them at the time. While the results of their actions were harmful in the extreme, a careful analysis of all pertinent and available facts disclosed the wisdom of

something I heard a wise man say many years ago: "There is no conscious evil."

Today public policy has become more a matter of emotion, prejudice, and politics than intellect and analysis. There is often a chasm between the managers who bow to the political and financial bosses and the people who do the work day in and day out. This is why it is so important that the causes of Challenger be identified, understood, and assimilated. The Challenger disaster was not an isolated incident. It was a symbol of our era and a parable for our times that calls for an informed, enlightened—and apolitical—public sector.

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