

# NASA needs more direction, not more criticism

By Christopher Blair

Just when it seemed the space agency was back on its feet after the 1986 Challenger explosion, it has recently suffered a number of embarrassing setbacks.

## Commentary

In May, a fuel leak on the space shuttle Columbia put it back in the NASA garage until the leak could be fixed. Last week, astronomers around the world were told that the mirrors on the long-awaited Hubble Space Telescope were not focusing correctly. The telescope will still be able to perform some of its observations, but it will take two or three years to schedule a rescue shuttle mission to get the \$1.5 bil-

lion device back to its "stellar" status.

And now this: The space shuttle Atlantis developed the same leak that plagued Columbia, forcing NASA to ground all three shuttles until the agency can find out why the identical problem occurred twice in two different spacecrafts.

As expected, members of Congress are miffed, chiding NASA for its technical problems. Sen. Albert Gore, D-Tenn., said NASA's eyes were "bigger than its stomach" when it came to developing projects, and that the agency doesn't pay enough attention to minute details. He also said NASA "owes it to the taxpayers to find out what went wrong, how to fix it and make sure it never happens again."

Congress' concerns are valid, and yes, NASA should pay

closer attention to detail. But perhaps those concerns are a bit out of focus.

It is interesting that while the defense department is handed a virtual blank check every year, the space program has always been blamed for wasting federal dollars and blasting them uselessly into orbit. Such criticism is unfair.

NASA has an annual budget of about \$10 billion, which it has to fight to keep every year. Granted, that is a lot of taxpayer money, especially when you consider the two broken shuttles and a nearsighted telescope floating around in outer space. And surely, that money could be put to good use here on the ground.

Regardless of the protest from Congress, however, keep in mind what \$10 billion means. Ten billion dollars is 1

percent of the federal budget, and is about equal to what President George Bush and Vice President Dan Quayle are given for their staff and for other "executive allocations."

That \$10 billion can pay for a year of speech-writing, White House maintenance, and executive junkets. It also can pay for a year's worth of weather satellites and orbiting laboratories, where new industrial products can be made and important pharmaceuticals can be developed in a weightless environment.

While Congress complains about NASA's trouble, remember this is the same Congress that gives the defense department an annual \$290 billion to play with. Of that, \$150 billion is spent every year "defending" Western Europe from the Soviets. Surely, that money

could be better spent, as could the \$79 billion that will be spent on the Stealth bomber, a machine whose effectiveness and relevance is being debated in the post-Cold War era.

What NASA needs more than needling from Congress is goals. No one, from the agency to lawmakers to the president, has any idea where the nation's space effort should carry us, a stagnating condition that could be partially to blame for the program's technical problems. A mission to Mars? A permanent space station? No one knows. Perhaps someone — Congress, NASA, anyone — should make that decision, and give the space program some direction.

Christopher Blair is managing editor of the Oregon Daily Emerald.



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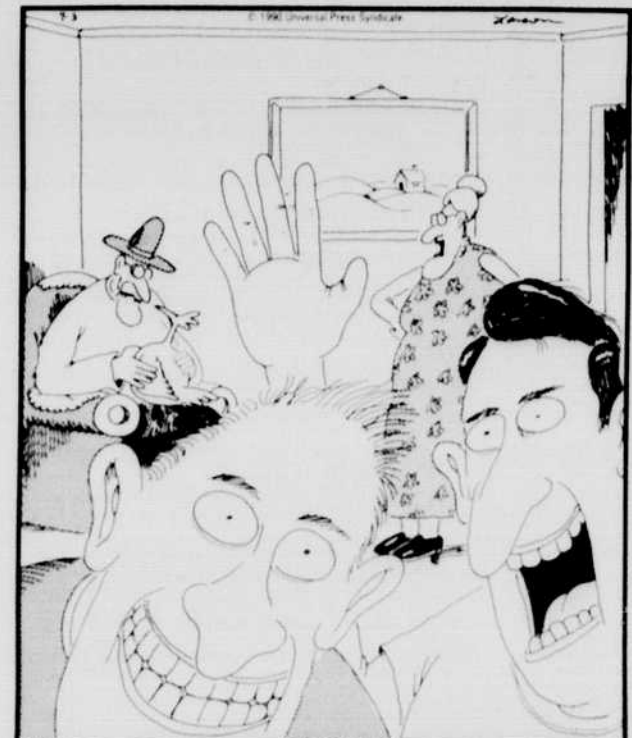
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