

The Film “The Challenger Disaster” Another Cover-Up

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The film “The Challenger Disaster” highlights Dr. Richard Feynman’s role in bringing to light the technical causes of the space shuttle Challenger tragedy after the crash of Challenger on January 28, 1986. Feynman, a professor at the California Institute of Technology and 1965 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physics, was a member of the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, also known as the Rogers Commission. He was appointed a member of the commission by a former student, NASA’s acting administrator William Graham, though, as he recounted in his memoirs, when Graham called, “I didn’t know who he was.”

But the film, to be aired on the Discovery and Science channels on November 16, 2013, already to critical acclaim, fails by conveying the misleading impression that Feynman’s role tells the whole story of Challenger or even the most important parts of it.

First, Feynman’s is only one part of a much larger, more complex, and more interesting saga of how multiple individuals with conscience spoke truth to power to disrupt NASA’s planned cover-up of this epochal event. While the film pays lip service to some of these other individuals—i.e., the engineers at Morton Thiokol who argued against the launch the night before the disaster—the story remains incomplete.

Second, Feynman did a remarkable job of bringing clarity in explaining the technical aspects of the O-ring failure scenario, but only by utilizing and dramatizing data already present within the NASA system, some of which had been leaked publicly by the time Feynman became involved.

Third, the Presidential Commission of which Feynman was a part was itself formed to perpetrate a cover-up by shielding President Ronald Reagan and the White House from being implicated when a prime cause of the disaster was the need to have Challenger airborne in time for Reagan’s state-of-the-union address that night. Feynman suspected as much and had begun to uncover evidence for it. Also, Reagan urged the launch to go forward because he was receiving calls from the television networks that were losing money by parking crews in Florida during NASA’s multiple launch delays. But Feynman did nothing to blow the whistle when Chairman William Rogers diverted attention by focusing the commission’s report solely on the technical problems and scapegoating mid-level managers at the Marshall Space Flight Center.

Fourth, the underlying cause of NASA’s decision to “fly-as-is” (using NASA’s own phrase for launching with known defects) with the flawed solid booster rocket joints was to avoid interfering with planned military flights for launch of reconnaissance satellites and in

connection with Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), popularly called "Star Wars." Feynman did nothing to urge that the militarization of space also be a focal point of the investigation as it surely should have been, though the matter came up in subsequent Senate hearings. In fact, the shuttle program was being taken over to serve as a testing platform for weapons in space to lead ultimately to nuclear space-based battle platforms. The Challenger disaster was, in effect, the end of SDI, making the Challenger astronauts martyrs to that ill-conceived venture. Feynman himself was one of the original developers of the atom bomb and a consultant for NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. He had to have known of the shift at NASA to military priorities.

These omissions have gone largely uncorrected in an overall public impression that the Presidential Commission did a complete examination of the circumstances of the tragedy and delivered to the public a comprehensive explanation. In fact it did not, and the film "The Challenger Disaster" fails to correct that false impression, as did mainstream media coverage following the tragedy. The media itself thereby became party to the unwillingness to confront the whole truth, and now the film "The Challenger Disaster" may be added to that dubious failure.

The complete story is contained in my own book *Challenger Revealed*, published in 2007 but now being released by Audible, Inc., as a talking book with myself as the narrator.

Challenger Revealed explains how the public hearing where Feynman conducted his famous ice-water O-ring experiment took place only after I released an explosive batch of O-ring documents to the *New York Times* that was reported as the lead article on Sunday, February 9, 1986, less than two weeks after the explosion. As a NASA analyst with insider access, I had been documenting engineers' fears that the flawed O-ring joint in the solid rocket boosters could destroy the shuttle on any given launch. One of the documents reported by the *Times* was my own warning memo of July 23, 1985. The *Times* story won reporter Phillip Boffey a share of the Pulitzer Prize.

As documented in *Challenger Revealed*, the February 11, 1986, hearing where Feynman took action had been convened by the chairman of the commission, William Rogers, a former attorney-general and secretary of state, in order to destroy my reputation before a worldwide television audience. I stood my ground under Rogers' grilling while Feynman was preparing his demonstration that involved dipping a piece of O-ring in a glass of ice water to show how it stiffened. This showed that the booster rocket seals containing the O-rings were bound to fail in the unusually cold weather at the Kennedy Space Center during the hours before the Challenger launch attempt.

Two weeks after this hearing, the engineers at Morton Thiokol, led by Roger Boisjoly and Al McDonald, told the press and the Commission that they had tried desperately the night before the launch to get NASA to stand down. But, they said, they were overruled by pressures from the space agency and from their own contractor management. Later in the Commission's hearings, NASA astronaut John Young put his own career on the line by arguing that schedule pressure had caused NASA to compromise safety.

Feynman died in 1988 so is not around to debate the issue. But while he may have acted heroically, he was not the only one to do so and failed in key respects, along with other commission members who could not conceive of swimming against the political tide. For my own testimony I received the Cavallo Foundation Award for Moral Courage in Business and

Government in 1991.

Also bear in mind that in 1986, when the disaster took place, whistleblowers were a rarity. Today we have many more cases involving people like Sibel Edmonds, Bradley Manning, Karen Hudes, and Edward Snowden. The Challenger disaster, where everything the public came to learn about what really happened originated with individuals who were bucking the system from within, was a forerunner for their heroism. Back then I was told by a news reporter, "They've killed people for less than what you did." But I believe that what I did paved the way for others.

The most important value for civilized living is honesty. That value is compromised by the film "The Challenger Disaster" by being careful not to rock any political boats. Let's be clear: high-level commissions, also including the Warren Commission and the 9/11 Commission, are usually created to conceal truth, not expose it. So did the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Accident. The film "The Challenger Disaster" walks in the commission's footsteps.

Beneath the surface of all this is a very dark understory: if the government kills you, it's up to them to decide how to pitch it to the public and history. I guess I just never bought into that.

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