

# Challenger Revealed: How the Reagan Administration Caused the Greatest Tragedy of the Space Age

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My book [Challenger Revealed: An Insider's Account of How the Reagan Administration Caused the Greatest Tragedy of the Space Age](#) is being published this month (February 2007) by Thunder's Mouth Press. It's the only book by a participant in both the events leading up to the Challenger disaster of 1986 and the investigations which followed it.

I went to work at NASA in July 1985, six months before Challenger blew up 73 seconds after liftoff in the freezing morning temperatures in Florida on January 28, 1986. I had been hired as a resource analyst in the comptroller's office at headquarters.

My first assignment was to interview the solid rocket booster engineers at headquarters who were looking at problems with the O-ring joints which connected the segments of the rockets. I was shocked when they told me that the flaws in the joints could cause the shuttle to blow up. They said they “held their breath” with every launch. Though a redesign was in the works, the shuttle would “fly as is” for over two more years. I reported this in a memo to

management.

There were other problems with the shuttle that caused people at headquarters to say that “sooner or later” there would be a catastrophe which would bring the program to a halt. But no one could stop it. The Space Transportation System had been declared operational by President Reagan after the fourth shuttle flight in 1982.

Besides, the shuttle was becoming a platform for space weapons testing under the Strategic Defense Initiative – “Star Wars” – so it was an integral part of the Reagan military build-up. Whether the military use of the shuttle was in agreement with the stated purpose of NASA’s 1958 enabling legislation – “that activities in space should be devoted to peaceful purposes for the benefit of mankind” – was a question no one seemed to be asking.

The greatest tragedy of the space age took place that cold January morning. Seven astronauts died, including Christa McAuliffe, the teacher-in-space. They were calling her mission “the ultimate field trip.”

NASA knew that same afternoon exactly what had happened to cause the disaster. The O-rings had been too cold to seal. A burnthrough in the side of one of the two booster rockets severed the strut which connected it to the external tank. The hydrogen from the tank ignited in a gigantic fireball, and the Challenger orbiter broke into pieces, with the crew cabin emerging intact. The cabin fell 40,000 feet and struck the ocean at 200 miles per hour. At least some of the astronauts were alive on the way down. We know this, because three of their emergency air packs had been activated.

NASA immediately moved to implement a cover-up, but more was going on than met the eye. A few days later a Presidential Commission was created by the White House which had its own cover-up agenda, namely to conceal White House involvement in the launch decision in connection with publicity for the teacher-in-space mission.

So I was sitting with my wife Phyllis in our house in rural Virginia with a pile of documents showing just how thoroughly NASA was aware of the O-ring problems and how they knew such a disaster could happen. I approached the Presidential Commission but sensed something was strange with their approach so quickly backed off. I tried to document internally that engineers were saying it was a preventable accident, but NASA confiscated all the copies of my report – except the one I took home, of course.

I made the decision to leak the O-ring papers, including my own July 23, 1985, warning memo, to the New York Times. The story that resulted, written by science writer Phillip Boffey, won the Pulitzer Prize.

Suffice it to say that almost everything the public learned about Challenger, notably the facts that the O-ring seals were known to be deficient and that the night before the launch, engineers from Morton Thiokol had argued vociferously against launching in the cold weather, originated with whistleblowers who defied their organizations to speak out. These included myself at NASA headquarters, Roger Boisjoly and Alan McDonald of Morton Thiokol, a member of the Presidential Commission, Nobel Prize winner Dr. Richard Feynman, and John Young, NASA’s most veteran astronaut. From one point of view, my book is the largely untold story of the whistleblowers.

But there were many things the official reports did not disclose. While the militarization of

the manned space program was the chief underlying cause of the disaster, not one word in the reports of the Commission or the House Science and Technology Committee mentioned this fact. The reports claimed that higher NASA officials were uninformed about the O-ring problems, which was untrue. The reports blamed poor communications and procedures, also untrue. NASA was the world leader in communications and procedures. Nothing was said about the fact that NASA was in the throes of a leadership crisis due to a virtual coup engineered by the political right-wing a few weeks before the explosion. Finally, the Commission claimed there was no political pressure from outside NASA to launch Challenger, which my book shows conclusively to be false.

In fact, Chairman William Rogers admitted to the Senate that the Commission didn't know why NASA launched when it shouldn't have. This was repeated in the report of the House Science and Technology Committee. Think of it – two major government investigations, months of hearings and investigations, thousands of pages of records and reports, and they said they didn't know why it happened.

My book analyzes all these issues through meeting notes, documents, interviews, and analysis, much of which has never before been disclosed in print. And my book, twenty-one years later, does tell you why and how it happened.

*Richard C. Cook and screenwriter Chaz Valenza are collaborating on a movie version of Challenger Revealed to be titled Single Point Failure, the story of a true patriot who has the courage to question authority, whatever the consequences. A political drama, the movie will depict the little known events and self-serving decisions leading up the tragic launch and deliberate cover-up.*

*Richard C. Cook [send him mail] is the author of Challenger Revealed: An Insider's Account of How the Reagan Administration Caused the Greatest Tragedy of the Space Age, called by Publisher's Weekly, "easily the most informative and important book on the disaster." He worked in the Carter White House and NASA before spending twenty-one years as an analyst with the U.S. Treasury Department. Once a high school history teacher, he is now a writer and consultant on public policy issues. Seeing how our debt-based monetary system has bankrupted our country, he is also working on a book on monetary reform. His website is at [www.richardccook.com](http://www.richardccook.com).*

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