

Remarks on the Occasion
of the
Space Shuttle *Columbia* Memorial Event

Michael D. Griffin
Administrator,
National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Kennedy Space Center
1 February 2008

[Edited for grammar and clarity from a transcript of Griffin's verbal remarks.]

Thank you, Steve, for that nice introduction. And thank you, Evelyn, for asking me to be here today. It is an honor.

With due respect for the time that everyone has committed to this event, I must ask for two speakers' time, because I have a message on behalf of another. I'll start with that message.

"I send greetings to those commemorating the fifth anniversary of the Space Shuttle *Columbia* tragedy. Our nation will forever honor the memory of the fallen crew. Space exploration is a dream deeply rooted in humanity. The seven brave astronauts of *Columbia* sacrificed their lives so that the rest of mankind could realize this dream. Rick Husband, Willie McCool, Mike Anderson, Dave Brown, Kalpana Chawla, Laurel Clark, and Ilan Ramon faced the dangers of space travel with courage and idealism. Their souls traveled together and they assumed great risks so that they could understand what lies beyond the heavens. We're grateful for their service and they will always be cherished.

"Five years after *Columbia* perished on its journey back to Earth, we continue our commitment to space exploration and our obligation to ensure the highest levels of safety. We've learned from the loss of *Columbia* and we're closer to visiting Mars and once again to walking on the moon. The United States is drawn to the challenge of discovery and all that the universe has to offer and the exploration of the unknown will lead to greater achievements on Earth and in space. Laura and I send our best wishes to the families and friends of the *Columbia* crew and, may God bless you and may God continue to bless America.

"Signed, President George W. Bush."

Evelyn, I would like to convey the original of this letter to you on behalf of the president.

I'd now like to continue with a few remarks on my own behalf. I was thinking, as I sat today listening to our other speakers, every one of them more eloquent than I, and wondering what I could say. I didn't hear anyone place ceremonies like this in the context of our lives and our profession, so I thought I'd try to do that.

Many speakers have talked today about the value of flight, space flight, and exploration, and I can only second those remarks. I think we all believe that this profession we're in is valuable, or we wouldn't be here. But it is a tough profession, and the toughest job of all falls to those who are married to, or are family members of, someone who is in it, and have to suffer through its trials and tribulations on their behalf. We know it's valuable. But if we think about it at all, we also know that it carries with it more risk than human beings customarily take in other walks of life.

Every student pilot is introduced to this fact by his or her first instructor. If you were a student pilot and didn't hear it from your instructor, you were misled. As a flight instructor, one of the very first things I tell my students is, "I'm not here to teach you to fly. I cannot teach you to fly. You will learn to fly, if you do, and I will keep you from killing yourself while you learn." They need to understand that. And if you become the best of the best, a military combat pilot or test pilot, someone like Jim Halsell, who is here today, who flew the SR-71, or like Jon McBride, who flew in combat, or others of you who are here and have done those things, you've very nearly reached the pinnacle represented by the best of the best of the best who are selected to become our nation's astronauts. And you don't do any of that without understanding full well that it's very risky. We're here today to honor those who got on the wrong side of that risk. Risk implies the possibility of loss, and in this profession that means to lose everything.

I can't continue without also noting the risk taken by those who engineer and design and build the vehicles that take us aloft, or those who commit them to flight. Folks like Bill Gerstenmaier, Bill Parsons and Wayne Hale, who are here today, or Bob Sieck, the longtime launch director here at KSC, and Jim Kennedy, former Director of KSC, or the many, many friends of mine who bear the risk of sending people aloft, and sometimes have to live with the consequences when it was not the right decision. You don't have to be the high level manager of a risky enterprise to understand this feeling. You have only to be a parent, and understand that feeling you have as your little ones go free in the world, knowing that sometimes that doesn't turn out well.

Some very few of us – Steve Lindsey and Bill Readdy, who are here today, come to mind – have both assumed those risks and committed others to them. And that is the most difficult challenge of all to face day after day after day.

We're here today to salute all the people in this very difficult profession who do this. Certainly, we honor the seven who were lost to us five years ago today on *Columbia*, the *Challenger* crew before them, and the crew of *Apollo 1*. But we also honor people that many of you don't know and haven't heard of, like Mike Adams, who, on the very flight on which he earned his astronaut wings, perished on re-entry in the X-15. And the many, many, many pilots we don't know, and the managers and engineers who committed them to flight, in this most difficult and captivating of all professions.

This profession represents the peak of what I think it is to be an American. Everyone here today either came here, like Kalpana Chawla, to participate in this great enterprise, or is the descendent of people who came here against very great odds. Some in this audience are the descendents of people who were brought here in slavery, and yet managed to survive the harshest of

environments and the harshest of odds, and nonetheless leave behind children and culture and heritage. Everyone in this country is, or is the descendent of, someone who braved great odds to come here and build a better life.

Such people understand what it means to pioneer and explore a new frontier, as we do in space. As Bill Gerstenmaier said earlier, Americans don't quit. And we won't quit. We'll never quit. But today is a day when we remind ourselves that not quitting can have high costs. We celebrate the people who bore those costs, and the people who remain behind, who live on with those costs five or 22 or 41 years afterward. We celebrate our losses and the people who remain behind to bear them. We want them always to know that they remain part of our family, that they will always be part of our family. That we don't forget, we will never forget, we can't forget, and this ceremony today is how we say that.

Thank you very for having me here today.