

STS-116 Post-launch Press Conference.

December 9, 2006

Kennedy Space Center

Q: Hi, Tom Costello with NBC. Congratulations again, to Dr. Griffin - this is kind of a finale for a great week for you. You've announced that you've found evidence of water on Mars; you've announced a plan to build a moon base by 2024; and you've now managed to get Discovery up on just the second try. For the big picture, though, can you give us a sense of what is all this for? In terms of the space station, there are questions regarding if it's worth the cost. In fact, when it's all done, will it justify the cost and the scientific achievements that you hope to get from the space station? So in the end what will all this accomplish in terms of the space station? What will the space station do when it is fully completed? What will it do for the American people and the world?

Dr.Griffin: Well, Tom, that was a great question. The questions about the space station, I think, were very appropriate, and I asked many of them myself early in my career, when the United States lacked plans for going on past the space station. I think it was not put any better than it was put in the report on the Columbia Accident investigation board by Admiral Gehman and his troops, when they pointed out that - I guess the bumper sticker version of it - is for the foreseeable future space travel is going to be expensive, difficult and dangerous but for the United States it's strategic and it is part of what makes us a great nation. I believe that. They pointed out that if we were going to do it, the goals ought to be worthy of the cost, the risk and the difficulty and that stopping at the space station did not meet such a standard.

So President Bush responded to that report. The administration looked at where we had been in space and said we need to do more and go further and the Congress ratified that overwhelmingly by a large majority on both sides of the aisle, saying that the purpose of the United States' manned space program is to go beyond, to explore the solar system for purposes of human exploration and scientific discovery. The space station is now a steppingstone on the way to that instead of being the end of the line. On the space station we will learn how to live and work in space. We will learn how to make hardware survive and function for three years that we're going to need if we were going to go to Mars. The space station is on the foot path toward becoming a space-faring nation.

Similarly, if we're going to go to Mars, if we're going to go beyond, we have to learn how to live on other planetary surfaces and use what we find there and bend it to our will, just as the pilgrims did when they came to what is now known as New England. The pilgrims -- you might recall that half of them starved the first winter. There was a reason their celebration was called Thanksgiving. They were only a few thousand miles from home and they were people who farmed for a living. And yet when they came to a new arena, they didn't know how to farm, they didn't know what food would grow, what food wouldn't. They didn't know what they could eat and what they couldn't.

We are going to have to learn how to live and survive in other places. The moon is a stepping stone on that path. When you bring it all together - the space station, the moon, looking forward past that to Mars, these are the steps that we have to take if we want to become a space-faring nation. I think that we should want that. I want that. I want that for the American people, for my grandchildren, for my great-grandchildren. NASA is the arm of the federal government that takes on this task. We do it as well as we can, sometimes we stumble. Today we didn't stumble. I'm proud of the team, but the nation should look ahead toward what the future brings and what the future will look like if we choose not to be a space-faring nation.